Messages In Bottles

Creative Writing, Distance Learning Pedagogy & Poetics

Portfolio Overview

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Abstract: Messages In Bottles

For this PhD programme I will submit three projects and an overview as follows:

1. One book-length collection of original poems written during the period 1990-1997. *Circular Breathing* was published by Dangaroo Press in September 1997 and received a Poetry Book Society Recommendation.

2. One book-length collection of original short stories, *Why I've Always Loved Fishmongers*, written or revised from earlier versions during the period 1989-1999. Not yet published in book form but many of the stories have appeared in literary journals or have been broadcast on radio.[1]

3. A folio of Open College of the Arts[2] distance learning creative writing courses and tutorial support systems. *Starting To Write*, *The Experience Of Poetry*, *Storylines* and the *Advanced* writing courses cover academic levels 1-3 of undergraduate study and were accredited by the University of Glamorgan in 1996, becoming the first accredited undergraduate distance learning creative writing courses in the UK.

Designed and written by me, these courses launched by OCA and accredited during the period 1989-1997, represent a significant contribution to this field of study. During this same period I also edited distance learning courses in autobiographical writing, *Lifelines*[3] and creative reading, *Reading Between The Lines*[4], to which this study will make reference.

4. An overview, *Messages In Bottles*, which will deal with how these projects informed each other; how my own experience of writing related to the creation of a new suite of distance learning writing courses; how that, in turn, led to the

[1] A full account of publications and broadcasts appears on the *Acknowledgements* page of the manuscript.
[2] The Open College of the Arts (OCA) was founded in 1987 by Lord Michael Young and Ian Tregarthen-Jenkin. It is affiliated to the Open University and the National Extension College and has pioneered university accredited distance learning courses in Painting, Photography, Music, Sculpture, Textiles, Garden Design, Interior Design, Dance and Creative Writing. It is in this context of educational innovation that the writing courses were commissioned.
[3] Brian Lewis & Reinhi Schullë, Ed. Graham Mort,1996
[4] Olive Fowler & Rachel van Riel, Ed. Graham Mort, 1997

creation of a learning network which gave support to writers and students and evolved a methodology of response to new work which itself mirrored the creative process.

The poet Paul Celan[5] described his poems as 'messages in bottles', raising important issues about human isolation and communication, about how literature is able to move through time and space to find its readership. Further issues about meaning, intention and understanding are raised by the metaphor and these too find a parallel in an educational process mediated through distance learning.

Writing as a creative practitioner and teaching as an educational one creates a continuum between creative and pedagogic expression. In the distance learning context, written feedback on students' work often reflects issues in the tutor's own writing and itself has form and structure just like any work of literature.The reflexive nature of writing and teaching find a correlation in the writing and learning process that a student undergoes.

The continuum which exists between the roles of writer, writing tutor and student writer connects closely with the formative process by which writers attempt to move through the arc from creative artist to objective reader in each new piece of work.

Central to the understanding and development of these relationships are the critical perspectives created by acts of disclosure through the teaching and learning process; these may be developed from personal disclosure in an educational context to a wider sense of audience and the possibilities of publication. The use of a learning journal[6] produces a text which parallels and comments upon the creative process. This, together with the tutorial report and the emergent creative work form a vibrant 'virtual workshop' and a powerful educational process.

These ideas will be explored with special reference to distance learning, taking in issues of:

[5] Paul Celan, born Paul Ansell, Romania 1920, survived the Holocaust, moved to Paris in 1948 and committed suicide there in 1970. See 'Paul Celan, Selected Poems', Penguin Modern European Classics, 1972

[6] See Appendix 1, p92, for OCA learning journal contents

- The strategic development of learners into 'autonomous' writers

- The role of professional artists as tutors, writers as artists and teachers, students as learners and apprentice writers

- The development of tutor/student relationships into writer-to-writer relationships

- Language function in creative and educational writing - the expression of human experience in pedagogic development

- The continuum of writing into reading: how writers become readers of their own texts, how readers become actors in what they read

- Learning through time and space: the processes of tuition through distance learning and written media

- Frameworks for assessment and self-criticism, the function of the learning journal and the reflective process

- Writing development and disclosure: how tutorial responses move the student's work towards the public domain

- How distance learning developments relate to the author's other educational workshop experience, drawing from and contributing to it through a working model of the imagination.

- How educational and creative work find common objectives through experiential learning linked to the exploration of new literary forms in performance, broadcast and installation.

This overview will develop from my own experience as a professional poet, short story writer, workshop leader, creative writing coursebook author and distance learning tutor. It will draw upon the experience of OCA tutors as writers and educators and upon the experience of students as learners in the tutorial relationship and as apprentice writers. It will also make reference to other literature in the field and access the archive of tutorial reports and student correspondence which exists at OCA.

Introduction

The projects outlined above which comprise this portfolio were written during a ten year period from 1989 - 1999, during which my work as a freelance writer and writing tutor coincided with, and informed, my work for the Open College of the Arts[7] in creative writing course development.

I gained my first degree, BA Hons. English Language and Literature, from Liverpool University in 1977 and subsequently studied to become a teacher on the Post-Graduate Certificate of Education course at St. Martins College Lancaster in 1980, specialising in English and Education of the Handicapped Child. In the intervening years I had worked as a mill labourer and dairy operative, and also as a nursing auxiliary in a psychiatric hospital for over two years. I then had a brief but varied teaching career which included Special, Middle, and High schools as well as an FE college, a prison and a psychiatric hospital. My first poems and stories were published in this period and I was a writer before I was an educator; work in education has therefore stemmed from my commitment to being a writer and enabling others to engage in the writing process.

This does not necessarily mean that I believe that everyone can be a writer in the professional sense, but I believe that language is fundamental to our human identity and that engagement with its twin peaks of impulse and precision offers an important synergy of emotion and reflection. That synergy in turn enhances our use and appreciation of language in all contexts, and through the extension of our empathetic capacity extends our very humanity - our physical and emotional sentience and, crucially, our ability to identify with the experience of other human beings. That use of writing as an aid to both extending and defining experience runs from my early work as a teacher at Cedar House Special School[8] in 1980/81, to my recent work in Gateshead Primary schools[9] in July 2000 where I worked with community artist Mary Robson on a 'Passports to the Future' emotional literacy project with year 10 pupils.

[7] See Appendix 2, p98, for OCA Creative Writing Prospectus
[8] One of the John Horner group of Schools, Kirkby Lonsdale, Cumbria
[9] St. Oswald's and Felldyke primary schools, Wrekenton, Gateshead

In 1986 I gave up formal educational employment and began to work as a freelance writer in education, running workshops in schools, colleges and community settings throughout the country. In that same year, my first book of poems,*A Country On Fire* (Littlewood Press) was published and gained a major Eric Gregory award from the Society of Authors[10]. In 1989, having begun to tutor for the Arvon Foundation[11] and the Taliesin Trust[12], and having by then worked on many writing projects, I was approached by OCA to write a new suite of distance learning creative writing courses.

In the next five years I wrote the coursebooks, devised the educational strategies, implemented the tutorial system, and built the systems of tutorial support and academic assessment which were later accredited by the University of Glamorgan. In this work I was aided in my supervisory role by a Course Officer[13] and a Course Committee[14] who were instrumental in refining many of the developments described in the main body of this overview.

In that same period I continued to write creatively, producing new collections of poetry and publishing short fiction in literary magazines.[15] I was therefore involved in both the creative and pedagogic aspects of the writing process, whilst also continuing to run writing workshops in a wide range of community, school and residential settings. I specialised in combined arts education projects in this period, working with painters, sculptors, photographers and other artists. In 1997 I began to write for radio when my first full-length BBC Stanza programme was broadcast[16]. In this same period I continued to tutor fiction and poetry students on the OCA writing courses at all levels, eventually concentrating mainly on *Advanced* students. I also taught on three OCA residential writing courses held at the Arvon Foundation, Lumb Bank, West Yorkshire, which further enriched my engagement with students and brought

[10] A professional association for writers which administers the Eric Gregory trust fund, allowing applicants under the age of 30, and selected on merit, time to develop their writing

[11] A national creative writing organisation which runs centres in West Yorkshire, Devon and Scotland and organises the prestigious Arvon Foundation International Poetry Competition. Courses are week long residentials taught by pairs of professional writers

[12] An almost exact counterpart to Arvon based near Cricieth and operating an English and Welsh language programme

[13] An experienced tutor who liaised directly with other tutors and operated the programme of tutor monitoring and development described below

[14] Chaired by the Course Leader, including the Course Officer who held responsibility for tutor monitoring and development, a tutor representative who acted as a conduit for tutor's views, one other tutor, and one member of OCA senior management

[15] See Appendix 3, p111, for Graham Mort publications list

[16] The Red Field, Stanza, BBC Radio 4, April 26th, 1997

together aspects of distance learning and face-to-face teaching.

The processes of writing as a creative artist and as an educationalist have never seemed separate for me. I continued to work as a poetry and fiction tutor for OCA, so that there was a very strong connection between writing, course creation and teaching, into which I fed ideas from my freelance work with a wide range of student writers. The more I reflected upon any aspect of these processes, the more that reflection seemed to invoke other, related aspects. The more I reflected, the more I felt the holistic nature of the processes, which, though they could be discretely identified, were springs emerging from a common reservoir of language, creative expression, and response to experience.

In March 1995 I attended a conference at Leeds University[17] to speak about accreditation. A large number of Higher Education tutor/writers were present and during a workshop presented by Sue Thomas[18] a kind of collective *crie de cour* erupted from the assembled writers to the effect that the demands of teaching were destroying their creativity. I had very little sympathy with this view and, despite the obvious practical issues of time commitment, I felt that teaching through distance learning and indeed in other face-to-face contexts, had the opposite effect and had positively enriched my creativity.

The exposure to such negative views about teaching at the conference made me curious about the opinions of my OCA colleagues. Was my experience unique, or did other tutors also recognise that teaching writing could act as a stimulus for new writing and the forms it might take? I began to ask these questions at tutor development meetings[19] with long-serving OCA tutors and the consensus seemed to be, that despite the time-consuming nature of OCA report-writing, there was something in the nature of distance learning that brought both pedagogic and creative rewards to the tutor.

The roots of my OCA teaching had been laid down in writing workshops, drawing on years of 'live' face-to-face experience. The excitement of that

[17] Creative Writing in the Arts, Education & Community, Dept. Continuing Education, University of Leeds

[18] Then teaching at Creative Writing at Nottingham Trent University

[19] Training sessions which practised OCA report writing in response to student work and discussed the wider issues of distance learning tuition, creating feedback between the tutors and the college

teaching, for me, had involved the act of extemporary speaking, extending workshops from familiar introductory exercises into unexpectedly new territory. This process was enabled by student response as the exercises unfolded and formed one of the primary 'energy loops' in an educational process to which students were contributing directly.

I came to regard speaking in this way as a fundamentally creative act. I open my mouth to address a group of students without knowing exactly what I'm going to say and organised speech arrives. Not only that, but often I surprise myself by saying unexpected or intriguing things which jolt me into a new realisation or path of enquiry. Donald Schön describes a very similar effect in the way that professionals act through, and extend, their tacit knowledge:

> Much reflection-in-action hinges on the experience of surprise. When intuitive, spontaneous performance yields nothing more than the results we expected for it, then we tend not to think about it. But when intuitive performance leads to surprises, pleasing and promising or unwanted, we may respond by reflecting-in-action.[20]

I began to think of this as 'thinking through speaking' and it connected with an observation I had made in dozens of writing workshops, that people who were 'thinking on purpose' were rarely writing at the same time. In fact, the deliberate act of thought seemed inimical to the initial impulse necessary for creative writing and represents, in fact, an act of self-censorship. Natalie Goldberg describes this same phenomenon:

> First thoughts have tremendous energy. It is the way the mind first flashes on something. The internal censor usually squelches them, so we live in the realm of second and third thoughts, thoughts on thought, twice and three times removed from the first fresh flash....This is the practise school of writing. Like running, the more you do it, the better you get at it.[21]

Automatic or improvised writing became a feature of my 'warm-up' exercises in workshops in order to allow the mind to spring its surprises on the student writer, to make them aware of the unconscious control that works against spontaneous expression. This can be seen as 'kinetic thought' where psychic energy is released through physical activity - in this case rapid mark-making on the paper.

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[20] Schön, 1983, p56
[21] Goldberg, 1986, p9, p11

Distance learning tuition involved me in a comparable process of extemporary writing and I became fascinated by those parallels. Generally, I wrote my tutorial reports[22] at high speed and yet, for the most part, they were sensible, often (I hope) stimulating essays on writing which expressed ideas that I had not always consciously formulated in advance. So teaching not only drew upon a core of knowledge which I had developed from experience, it advanced that knowledge and experience in surprising ways. This 'thinking through (critical) writing' found a direct corollary in the impulsive way that I would use my notebooks or make first drafts of poems or stories.

The knowledge expressed in my tutorial reports related directly to the medium in which I also worked as a creative artist. I did not work full-time for OCA until 1999 (when the pressure of management responsibilities began to distort the equilibrium), and spent a ten year period in which each area of my experience freely informed the others: new creative work was written alongside new pedagogic strategies and alongside my verbal and written responses to student writing in a range of distance learning and face-to-face situations.

The systems of monitoring tutorial reports in OCA[23] had also given me direct access to the tutorial responses of other writers, to the range and style of their approaches within the OCA framework. I became curious about the experience of other tutors as writers, soliciting their comments at tutor development meetings and, more formally, through their written responses to my newsletters and memos on OCA development. These responses moved my enquiries on into key areas, including a more theoretical framework for the distance learning process, which was expressed in papers written for the 1999 and 2000 Sheffield Hallam University Creative Writing Conferences and published in their Conference Proceedings[24] . Those papers form the basis for sections of this overview, though they have been edited from their original context of ongoing OCA development, for reasons explained below.

During my period of engagement with OCA I first became Course Leader for Creative Writing, overseeing a body of up to 500 students and 40 tutors. In 1997 I took over the College Photography courses and developed them along the same model, overseeing 8 tutors and 140 students. In 1999 I was offered

[22] See Appendix 4, p114, for examples of tutorial reports
[23] All tutors submitted 6 reports for checking on a bi-annual basis
[24] See Appendix 6, p141, for original papers. Also published in electronic format via the National Association of Writers in Education Website - www. nawe.co.uk

the post of Director of Studies with the task of deploying my strategic initiatives in writing across all five schools within the college: Writing, Photography, Design, Visual Arts and Music. In that year I worked full-time for OCA, drawing up a blueprint for re-structuring, academic development, and accreditation transfer (from Thames Valley University) which would consolidate our academic programmes with the University of Glamorgan[25].

In 1997 another strand of academic involvement was developed when I was asked to work as a consultant on a range of new HE accredited Level 2 Creative Writing modules which the University of Leeds Department of Continuing Education[26] were introducing. The modules consisted of Level 2 'Craft' modules which encouraged a wide range of experimentation in the genre of poetry and fiction and Level 2 'Workshop' modules which mainly encouraged the student's own creative voice. Following my report on the module outlines, I was asked to become external examiner for the courses, my tenure to run from 1999 to 2001. That work has helped to create a further perspective on the OCA developments I carried out and has provided me with valuable experience of folios in poetry and prose which seek to develop creative writing alongside critical and reflective writing.

Meanwhile, I had already registered for MPhil by portfolio at the University of Glamorgan and was writing my research papers alongside a high-volume management job in OCA. The balance that I had managed to maintain between creativity and educational innovation was now creaking under a heavy workload; furthermore, I was forced to make the invidious distinction between a practical working model that had been developed under one set of circumstances and the implementation of a blueprint of that model across a number of study areas which needed a particular management culture in which to flourish. But that culture was changing rapidly under new economic and logistical pressures[27] and my planning documents began to seem more like rhetoric than an actual process which could be put into practice and over which I could exert control.

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[25] See Appendix 7, p181, for Accreditation Transfer Document

[26] Courses supervised by Dr. Rebecca O'Rourke at the Middlesbrough and Leeds teaching centres with a staff made up of part-time writers with HE experience

[27] Group face-to-face tuition in the visual arts had come under fierce competition from local FE provision, with a resulting drop in enrolments, and a backlog of course revisions had begun to create maintenance problems on the courses themselves

Accordingly, I took the decision to leave my post as Director of Studies in OCA in April 2000 and to return to freelance writing, tutoring and research - including the completion of this PhD folio. So, whilst the sections of this folio that deal with OCA did not evolve into new action-research programmes as I had originally envisaged, they are nonetheless a working model based on empirical research over a 10 year period. Despite the retrospective nature of my reflections on OCA, I have often left my writing in the present tense to preserve the sense of immediacy which I always felt in my engagement with the College.

The creation of this folio has been an attempt to outline the processes of my developmental work during this period and to understand them in terms of wider critical, cultural and even scientific thinking. Other art-form processes and areas of intellectual enquiry, from sculpture to biology and physics, proved to be a rich source of metaphor for the writing process. To a large extent, this overview is a narrative linking those metaphors, but trying to keep Paul Celan's[28] notion of distance, with its implication of rescue, in view.

The overview will concentrate on educational developmental work, which began from my own experience of creative writing, whilst absorbing and reflecting upon the way in which this further influenced my writing and thinking about educational process during the same period. My writing on OCA focuses on a model of best practise which, we know from student feedback[29] , changed individuals' lives from a position of isolation and frustration to one of contact, communication and possibility, providing responses to their own creative 'messages'. This is not to ignore the many problems that accompanied the building of the courses and their response structures, but those problems were mainly logistical, administrative or financial, and never led me to think that the essential process was flawed.

Distance learning is not suited to all potential students or tutors, but that does not reduce its potency when it is appropriately applied and leads to an engagement which leaves many students and tutors overwhelmingly enthusiastic. The overview does recognise that there are other, hybrid

[28] See page 1, footnote 5, for source of this reference

[29] Student questionnaires issued each year provided a range of feedback, but the scores for writing tuition and materials were uniformly positive on aggregate. The Assignment Commentaries of students opting for assessment were often accounts of a life-changing and life-enhancing process

possibilities, and touches upon ways in which OCA began to blend distance and face-to-face learning by working with other creative writing agencies.[30]

This overview represents an interpretation at a moment in time, an apparent point of rest in the trajectory of a process which tries to unite sightings from a number of relative observational positions - my own, and those of students and tutors who I have worked with. As well as interpreting the point of rest, it will try to project a sense of restlessness, the motion which moves ideas and practice forward. Of the liberating nature of education, Paulo Freire said:

> All educational practice implies a theoretical stance on the educator's part. This stance in turn implies - sometimes more, sometimes less explicitly - an interpretation of man and the world. It could not be otherwise. The process of men's orientation in the world involves not just the association of sense images as it does animals. It involves above all, thought-language; that is, the possibility of the act of knowing through his praxis, by which man transforms reality.[31]

This overview will attempt to tease out the theory implicit in the educational practice which I designed and implemented; it will also attempt to show how I have begun to map and understand, through my educational and creative navigations, the nature of reality and its transformations.

[30] e.g. a 'hybrid' writing course which added a diagnostic distance learning tutorial to a residential course held at the Arvon Foundation at Lumb Bank, July 2000

[31] Freire, 1970, p21

The Open College of The Arts[32]

The Open College of the Arts is now entering its twelfth year of existence as an independent educational organisation dedicated to providing open access to arts education. In that time it has moved from complete self-governance to a position where it is affiliated to colleges and universities within the public sector and now offers academic credit points on the CATS[33] scheme. OCA has remained in charge of its own economic destiny, whilst also being able to offer recreational, vocational and academic options to its students. This, at a time when much greater financial control of education is exerted by central government and a heavy burden of accountability levied, has begun to define its relative independence as a uniquely desirable, if often precarious, part of its identity

The purpose of any organisation is perhaps best understood through its actual flight-path rather than than by the rhetoric of its mission statement. In the past twelve years OCA has undergone a number of economic and educational shock-waves - notably a major downsizing operation in 1997 which led to the loss of all but two Regional Organisers and all but two Course Leaders (originally five in both cases) - and those seismic tremors have tested all aspects of its operation. In some ways not being a revenue client of government or of the Arts Council has created a very direct transmission of cause and effect from the public desire for education to OCA's provision of courses. If they get it seriously wrong, then they quickly go out of business. But such an organisation not only answers the aspirations of individuals in society, it stimulates, defines, shapes and interprets them through the conduit of its artistic and educational enterprise.

The creative writing courses have been a stable element in OCA from their inception in 1989. They began as a pilot scheme with a few dozen students and now enrol around 500 students each year. At the time of their foundation, provision for study in creative writing in Higher Education was patchy and mainly provided by the post-graduate courses at Lancaster University and the University of East Anglia. In the ten years since OCA launched its first course,

[32] All coursebooks referred to in this section of the overview and of which I had direct authorship are to be found in the Portfolio submission

[33] Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme

provision has burgeoned both at undergraduate and post-graduate level, often facilitated by the introduction of modular degrees, so that creative writing is now part of the greater catholicity of higher education in the UK. During that same period OCA creative writing enrolments climbed steadily to a peak of around 600, indicating that we were still reaching a large constituency of students whose primary interest lay in a practical rather than academic exploration of writing.

At a recent Yorkshire Arts conference held in Sheffield[34] to launch the Year of the Artist, delegates expressed two overwhelming and contradictory desires, both contained within the notion of 're-integrating' the artist into society. The first was that they be recognised as ordinary human beings, as *workers* in their local communities; the second was that the power of their artistic practise to render them *extraordinary* should also be recognised. With the loss of craft and industrial skills in the post-industrial era it was perceived that the gap between artists and members of the public - audiences, consumers, sceptics - has widened to an unacceptable and unbearable degree. At this point I was struck by the way in which the act of recognition for the artist-as-worker in the community and the belief in the power of art to express and transform our individual and collective humanity lay at the heart of OCA creative writing practise. Perhaps we had begun to solve some of the problems which troubled delegates at that conference.

OCA courses and tutorials are managed by a Course Leader who oversees the academic standards and maintains the course materials, and by a Course Officer who works directly with the induction, monitoring and support of tutors. In the case of the writing courses, all tutors are required to be published creative writers with teaching experience. From the Course Leader to the newest tutor, OCA writing personnel form a community of poets, playwrights, novelists, short-fiction writers and script-writers; they interact with a student community who, in turn, bring a wide range of personal and professional experience to the process.

The Arts Council of England[35] literature department[36] was approached for grant aid for all the original suite of Level 1 and 2 writing courses. This was

[34] 'Marking The Millennium', Pond's Forge, 14th March,1999
[35] ACE
[36] Then led by Dr. Alistair Niven

forthcoming and in 1996 and 1997 ACE sponsored courses in autobiographical writing and creative reading respectively. The grant aid was given for two main reasons. Firstly, to give support to an educational programme likely to widen the practice of writing and the audience and readership for literature. Secondly, to offer support to writers[37] acting as OCA tutors who, it was acknowledged, could now earn some income directly from home, rather than by having to travel large distances to educational workshops and other activities.

The OCA Creative Writing Pilot Scheme

The OCA creative writing pilot scheme began in 1989 when, in partnership with Dr. Tony Flower[38] , I began to create the first draft of the *Starting To Write* coursebook. The process was one which involved me in writing the first draft of the introduction, tutorial methods, examples, exercises and assignments, with Tony adding notes and suggestions. After the pilot year I revised the coursebooks twice[39] , so that the ideas embedded in it became more and more a result of consultation with tutors whose views we had solicited, tutors who had been appointed as consultants to the revision process, and my own first-hand teaching experience. Questionnaire research was also used each year to obtain feedback from students about the courses.

During the pilot year we wrote the coursebook in three sections, working to a very tight schedule and releasing the new section to tutors just in time for the relevant tutorial. The College had advertised for its first tranche of students in the north of England and, at this stage (summer 1989), it was envisaged that we would offer face-to-face tutorials as well as a distance learning option. Using the Northern Association of Writers in Education[40] 1990 Writer's Directory, which I had been instrumental in editing and collating, I appointed six northern-based tutors and also took on the tuition of a group of face-to-face students and six distance learning students myself. Similarly, each appointed

[37] My endeavour to have OCA tutors recognised as practising artists as well as teachers culminated in the award of six £3,000 Royal Literary Fund writing bursaries to tutors in March 2000

[38] Dr.Tony Flower worked closely with Lord Michael Young, Chairman of OCA, in this period of the College's development to commission new courses and to oversee a developing arts education framework

[39] Including a major rewrite in 1996

[40] Northern Association of Writers in Education, now the National Association which publishes the Directory on-line at www.nawe.co.uk

tutor taught a group of face-to-face students and each tutor had a number of distance learning students.

The assumptions which lay behind my course writing at this stage were that in order to learn to write students have to become aware of the nature of experience as well as the disciplined demands of writing. The problems that I'd encountered with other groups of students in the early stages of writing were nearly always to do with them carelessly 'glossing' an experience rather than unfolding it in exact sensory detail. Accordingly, the course books encouraged students to be aware of their physical surrounding through direct sense impressions. They were also made aware of the mental activity (dreams, daydreams) that accompany such physical awareness. This led to the first stage of intense and impulsive observational writing in notebooks, the gathering of verbal 'raw material' from which a poem or story might emerge.

The second stage, that of shaping the work into literary form was essentially reflective, so that a rhythm between the poles of impulse and consideration was established. The process of revision often involved cutting back on the sheer detail of the early drafts, retaining its energy, but selecting key images and vocabulary. Larger pieces of work were built from initial exercises which developed observational and drafting skills, so that the building of a finished piece was incremental. The notion of structure in writing and construction in a process were emphasised. Students were discouraged from writing in commercial or popular genres and encouraged to find their own voice and writing style. In the course materials a work of literature was projected as a structure which was directly *experienced* by the reader, rather than self-consciously expressed or *explained* by the writer.

I wrote many of the drafting exercises in the coursebooks, importing literary examples from as wide a range of cultural sources as possible as the coursebook was re-drafted. Given the time-constraints that accompanied course-writing (usually a total of 6 months) it proved difficult to make those examples as culturally inclusive as I would have wished. This is especially true of *Storylines*, the Level 2 fiction course, which featured no Black, Asian or Caribbean writers at the time of its launch and remains in need of revision to broaden its frame of reference. The 1996 rewrite of *Starting to Write* gave me the opportunity to include more diverse exemplar material. The bringing of all

course-book printing in-house by around that same date theoretically allowed for a more flexible and cost-effective revision process, but in reality this proved to be a low priority for OCA senior management team faced with serious financial constraints.

The *Starting to Write* pilot scheme worked well, in the sense that student and tutor feedback about the structure and process was favourable, and the initial group of students produced some high quality work, though it was by no means uniformly high. The face-to-face tutorials had helped to establish very direct feedback about the course materials and this led to the first revision - a process of collation and consolidation of the three discrete units of study into one coursebook. Clearly, we had a course which was solid in conception and which could work in either a face-to-face situation or through distance learning.

In June 1990, the revised coursebook was professionally printed, and the course advertised in the OCA *Guide to Courses*. By Autumn 1990 the first new intake of students were beginning to enrol and a serious logistical problem quickly became evident. The geographical spread of students was such that it proved impossible to organise the students into groups without making some students wait an inordinate length of time for their course to begin. There was no guarantee that convenient clusters of students would form in order to to allow viable groups[41] to be convened and, accordingly, the decision was taken to abandon the face-to-face element and concentrate on a pure distance learning model.

The decision was taken with some regret, but proved a fortuitous one since it removed the logistical problems that attended group tuition in other OCA courses and that continued to trouble the college until the group tuition scheme was abandoned in Autumn 2000 in favour of distance learning and one-to-one tutorials. In those early years (1987-1997) the College employed a network of Regional Organisers who helped to set up tutorial groups. Bypassing that system allowed direct control over academic administration and development and also created a lean economic model with low overheads. This meant that creative writing was able to develop its academic and educational infrastructure more quickly than other courses and, subsequently, it became the model for development throughout the college.

[41] Groups of at least 6 students

In order to recruit new tutors, an advertisement was placed in The Guardian newspaper *Creative & Media* page, requesting CV's from experienced writing tutors. Our stipulation was that applicants should have had work published in book form, or performed, and that they had experience of teaching creative writing in some context - preferably with adult learners. The response led to a data-base of over thirty tutors being established and applications continued to arrive on a regular basis. Tutorial reports were taken from the pilot scheme and used as exemplar material in inducting new tutors, and the deployment of this documentation proved very useful in allowing new tutors to gain insight into what was expected of them in tutoring the course. This process eventually became the model of tutor monitoring and development described below.

Removing all mention of face-to-face tuition from the coursebook also took away the problems of maintaining a dual-purpose teaching resource which would have had to make reference to parallel teaching processes: those of distance and face-to-face learning. However, it was now necessary to reinforce the coursebook with examples of writing and writing-in-progress in order to create a more supportive distance learning manual.

As an open learning course[42] the writing module attracted a wide range of students from all kinds of social and educational backgrounds. This involved writing materials in a tone and style that had to appeal to unqualified students as well as those who might already hold degrees. The slightly condescending tone of the early drafts was quickly hardened off into a more robust approach, though without removing any of the very detailed information concerning tutorial procedures and the steps leading up to the submission of assignments. In this way we hoped to provide hand-holds for students who needed them, whilst allowing more confident students to move quickly through the support material.

Enrolments climbed steadily in the first years of writing course development; (1989-1997). Advertising only one method of tuition in the college *Guide to Courses* took away an invidious decision from prospective students and may have helped to create a clear and well-defined option which worked in business terms as well as educational ones. Maintaining attendance at

[42] OCA defined this as 'open' in the sense of requiring no previous artistic or academic experience

groups in any subject area was difficult because nearly all students were mature individuals with many other commitments. The success of creative writing revealed the innate flexibility of the distance learning model, which allowed a student to work at their own pace without commitment to regular group meetings.

The main problems with the pilot scheme were ones which remained issues throughout my tenure at the college.These involved tutors not returning students' work on time, or students dropping out from the course, often to reappear again months later. Precise guidelines were introduced into the tutorial system and the apparatus of tutor development and monitoring which were developed helped to create a sense of professionalism throughout the process. Drop-outs in the writing course proved no higher than elsewhere in the college[43] and a system of registering 'drop-outs', 'deferments' and 'dormant' students was introduced in order to manage and monitor the process more accurately. A telephone Helpline was set up so that students with problems could obtain immediate help from an 'independent' tutor[44], and the Course Leader was always available to both tutors and students to resolve urgent academic or administrative issues.

After the pilot year, the tutorial system and the six-assignment structure of the coursebook changed little, and it became the models for the new Level 2 and 3 courses described below.

The Level 1 Writing Course[45] and Tutorial Practice[46]

The first creative writing course was conceived as a 'first step' into writing, a general introductory course which would take students through broadly referenced process, touching upon poetry, prose description, characterisation and dialogue, as well as tackling wider issues such as language, style and structure. The early assignments on the course (1-4) were quite tightly prescribed but the course progressively allowed students a wider choice of

[43] These could routinely be as high as 30%

[44] A tutor who was not their own tutor

[45] See *Starting to Write* coursebook in the Portfolio

[46] All tutors and students who are quoted in this overview have given permission for their writing to be placed in the public domain, but I have recognised the nature of their relationship with the confidential processes of education and protected their anonymity by assigning each one a letter-based coding. Where a tutor or student is named, then I am quoting from a document that was initially written for public view

literary form and subject matter. The course was structured as if the student were coming alive through their senses and writing from such direct experience was encouraged through the use of a writer's notebook.

The course tried to address writer-to-reader contact through exploring the ways in which we are humanly alive: through spontaneously written observational notes, the evocation of the physical senses and the shared experiences of the intellect, spirit and imagination. Great emphasis was placed on the *process* of writing development, on the journey rather than on points of arrival. The exploratory nature of the course, the notion that writing could both express and extend experience, was captured by one student who said; 'I don't know why I'm doing this course, I just want to find out more about myself, about writing and about the world.'[47]

The sending of work to a tutor was seen as a formative process by which the tutor moved the work forward. In the act of transmission from writer to reader the tutor acted as a first-stage audience, responding to the fundamental 'readability' of the work as well as addressing more technical aspects of language, form, structure and narrative stance.

Starting To Write was based on a practical workshop manual which offered a series of structured exercises leading up to six assignments. The course would take a student six months to complete if they submitted one assignment to their tutor each month. In response to the student's work tutors would send detailed written feedback which aimed to provide positive criticism and guidance within the framework of the course. This report addressed broad issues of development as well as the verbal texture of the writing. Students were encouraged to correspond with their tutors in order to create a dialogue in parallel to the creative work. Essentially, all the processes and forms of communication on the course involved the exchange of writing, from fiction and poetry through to tutorial transactions and the course content.

Level 2 Writing Courses[48]

As more and more students enrolled for *Starting to Write,* the college had to face the issue of progression. By allowing the students to experiment with

[47] OCA Student A, *Starting to Write*, Level 1
[48] See *Storylines* and *The Experience of Poetry* in the Portfolio

literary forms, the structure of *Starting to Write* contained a diagnostic element and by the end of the course, the free choice of assignments tended to lead students towards either poetry or prose, though a few continued to experiment with both those literary forms.

It was decided to provide two further writing courses which would not only allow students to progress in a specialised way, but which would take advantage of the expertise of tutors as writers. A course in poetry, *The Experience of Poetry*, and in short fiction, *Storylines* were commissioned by OCA and written by me, using tutors from the courses as consultants. The process of drafting these new courses and sending them out to specialists for their opinion redeployed and extended the paradigm of the tutorial process itself and was an effective process of action-research.

Both courses shared some common elements, whilst dealing with very different genres. Neither coursebook contained writing exercises, following the assumption that the students had, by this stage, gained some degree of autonomy. Both began with a short essay offering some historical perspectives on the development of the genre in question, and both offered technical and philosophical perspectives. Extensive reading lists, including contemporary magazines, were included and so were extensive examples of creative work - much of this commissioned from OCA tutors. All contributors were profiled in the appendix so that students could find and read the work of OCA tutors as well as that of other contemporary writers. Students enrolling on these courses would be taught by a specialist writer who had a record of publication as a poet or author of short fiction. So the courses raised the profile of OCA tutors as both writers and specialist tutors[49] . These courses extended six assignments over a nine month period, allowing more time for composition, revision, experimentation and the maturation of drafts.

These second-level courses also contained another element in common: that of 'creative tension'. In the poetry course this took the form of an analysis of the relationship between subject matter and form, whilst on the fiction course the creative work was accompanied by commentaries written by the authors designed to reflect a wide range of practice. In this case, there could be a tension between the author's story and their commentary on it, and between

[49] The OCA Advanced folio contained in the Portfolio submission shows some of the key tutors and their specialities, a list of tutors also appears in the OCA Prospectus, see Appendix 2, p98

the accounts of the working practises of different writers. The basis for this approach was, again, the growing autonomy of the student. By publishing the kinds of debate that took place inside a writer's head when dealing with new work, it was believed that the student's own inner-deliberations might be stimulated. If *Starting to Write* was designed to get students to write in a certain way - primarily 'showing not telling' - then the level two courses were designed to put them on the road of becoming the writers they wanted to become. All forms of commercial genre writing were eschewed in favour of an approach that tried to promote a breadth of 'good writing' through the concept of communicability. What students attempted to say in their work was measured against what was being heard by the reader - or by the tutor, who became a representative, albeit specialised, reader.

Level 3 *Advanced* Writing Courses[50]

Increased enrolment on OCA's Level 2 courses led to the need for progression onto a further level of study. The philosophy underlying this development was underpinned by two earlier developments: the raising of the profile of tutors in the tutorial process and the increasing autonomy of students.

A level of study was envisaged where students and tutors would be brought together through a much more considered process. Level 1 & 2 tutors were still identified by the college administration and allocated to students arbitrarily unless a special request had been made with regard to the sex or cultural background of the tutor. But on the new *Advanced* course the profiles of tutors would be presented to students as a folio of options and students would choose a tutor whose creative and pedagogic intentions most closely matched their own or seemed to offer the most stimulus.

The structure remained very much the same: seven tutorials were introduced over a 12 month period, but the first tutorial was set aside for correspondence between the tutor and student in which a written 'contract'[51] was agreed. This 'contract' set out the intention of the student at the point of enrolment and formed the framework and reference point for the course. Not only did the *Advanced* course raise the profile of the tutor as a creative practitioner within

[50] See the *OCA Advanced Writing Courses* in the Portfolio submission
[51] See Appendix 8, p191, for examples of *Advanced* writing contract

the OCA community, through negotiation it created a personal writing programme for the student. Furthermore, it was now possible to offer a more subtle and flexible range of options through this method, allowing students to embark on more extended projects. A typical student enrolling for the *Advanced* course might have the ambition to work on a collection of poems or short stories or to start a novel.

University Accreditation & Assessment of OCA Creative Writing Courses

The essential structure of the OCA writing courses from levels 1-3 was now established and a criterion-based assessment scheme[52] was developed alongside the structure. Broad criteria were established as follows:

Skills (technical competence)
Knowledge (awareness of styles, conventions, subject matter)
Invention (creative use of language and subject matter)
Judgment (appropriate use and control of language and subject matter)
Empathy (the ability to 'enter into' places, characters and energies)

Those broad criteria were supported by more detailed criteria drawn from the 'aims & outcomes' of each course. A team of three assessors, including the Course Leader, was formed and each assessment was accompanied by a detailed mark sheet. The Assessment Officer ratified the final grades by comparing those sheets. The criteria were never used as a prescription for good writing, but provided the framework for assessment. What the assessors were really in search of were the surprises and delights that come with the absorption and control of technique and subject matter.

Built into the assessment process was a minimum three-month period in which students were urged to develop their writing in the light of all they had learned on the course. This meant that earlier, somewhat fragmented, efforts at poetry or prose description could develop into more consolidated artistic creations. In simple terms, the assessment process was designed as a formative rather than a summative aspect of the course.

[52] See Appendix 9, p195, for assessment criteria and learning outcomes

Accreditation and the Learning Journal

In 1996 this suite of creative writing courses was successfully submitted to the University of Glamorgan for accreditation and became the first distance learning accredited courses at undergraduate level in the UK. Each module or course was awarded 40 credit points and it was recognised that existing levels of study (1-3) equated to the same levels in Higher Education. Previous experience of seeking accreditation in the visual arts subjects had alerted the writing Course Committee to the problems of seeking academic status for what were regarded as 'practical arts courses'. This led to the formalisation of the correspondence between a tutor and student into a learning journal where students were invited to reflect upon their experience of the course, to comment upon their tutor's advice and to focus the tutor's attention on their own concerns. As each level of study finds the student a more autonomous actor, then so the learning journal assumes a greater importance in the tutorial process.

Examination arrangements for OCA writing students already existed before accreditation, but the accreditation process led to some refinements. In order to address issues of 'academic rigour' an external examiner[53] was appointed to sample examination folios and to provide quality control. This, in turn, provided a new strand of feedback into the development process. The provision of an Annual Monitoring Exercise[54] to the accrediting body, the University of Glamorgan, also helped to focus attention on communications and developments issues. This included lines of feedback from students to the college and, accordingly, the assessment of students was followed up by a simple questionnaire[55] which sought to identify any problem that they might have experienced with the assessment process.

In 1998, through consultation with the external examiner, it was decided by the Course Committee that all assessed students should provide evidence of critical engagement with their own writing, the learning experience and other literature. In short, that the creative work examined should be accompanied by a 'reflective account'[56] drawn from the learning journal and taking an overview

[53] Professor Linden Peach, Loughborough University
[54] See Appendix 10, p201, for example of Annual Monitoring report
[55] See Appendix 10, p201 for questionnaire
[56] See Appendix 11, p207, for reflective account guidelines

of the whole course. The account accompanied the folio of creative writing and, though initially not marked, helped to establish the intentions of the student and the context for the work. This led to the completion of a process which interlinked a number of related forms of writing, from critical commentary to reflective and expressive forms. The final creative folio can be seen as the 'message', which arrives encapsulated in the transparent medium of the tutorial and reflective processes.

By 1999 the reflective account had become such a strong element in the assessment process that the Course Committee and external examiner decided to award it a mark in the assessment process. The student's final mark consisted of the four strongest marks, so that a good reflective account could pull up a student's mark, but a poor one would not diminish it. This distillation of material in the learning journal continues the process of reflection at a crucial stage (completion of the course), and moves it into a new, summative phase. One OCA tutor with wider HE experience observes:

> I think that the value of distilling down is that it acts to ensure there really is critical reflection rather than recording; and it helps the writer develop a more developmental sense.[57]

This final reflective phase not only brings about developmental learning benefits, but avoids the problems of marking and assessing the journal entries themselves - which some institutions undertake and which, it might be argued preserves the immediacy of the journal, but also diminishes its spontaneity through an awareness that it will eventually be marked.

Tutorial Feedback

The published or performed writing of OCA tutors is the primary basis for their appointment and only published writers and experienced tutors are employed. New tutors receive copies of tutorial reports from existing tutors in order to establish a common standard and methodology of response. After the new tutor has processed two student assignments for each member of their initial cell of 12 students, the Course Officer samples their work and gives detailed feedback upon it.

[57] OCA fiction tutor Dr. Rebecca O'Rourke, Deputy Coordinator, Accredited Continuing Education Section, School of Continuing Education, University of Leeds

The student engages in both creative and reflective writing thought the mechanism of the course. That writing is itself generated by print-based media in the form of the coursebook which is a synthesis of examples of creative writing, structured exercises and analysis of the writing process. The tutor responds to the student's writing in a tutorial report which has form and structure in relation to the course and in relation to the student's work. That report is driven by the student's creative and reflective writing, but it may equally gain impetus from the tutor's creative writing as they focus and discuss their own concerns through the medium of the student's work.

The Course Officer continues to sample all tutorial comments on an annual basis and organises tutor development events which disseminate good practice through written reports, practical workshops and discussion. An anthology of student work, Crossing The Border[58] , is published on a regular basis and tutors may make reference to work in it as part of their tutorial response, perhaps discussing what other students are trying to achieve through their writing. Crossing The Border widens the act of disclosure from the tutor to a public readership .

The processes of the course can be seen as essentially reflexive elements that engage students and tutors in a complex network of creation-response-creation. In his discourse on human culture as an aspect of genetic evolution, Edward O. Wilson discusses biological models of behaviour and at one point describes the pheremonal communication within an ant colony as a 'semiotic web'.[59] In many ways this describes the way in which the 'hard-wired' or direct communication between individual tutor and students in OCA is diffused in a much more subtle way to all actors in the network via the discussion and dissemination of good practice. The individual student belongs to the tutor's own tutorial cell and both the tutor and student belong to the wider community of tutors (40) and writing students (500) that exists at any time in the college.

[58] See copy of Crossing the Border in the Portfolio
[59] Wilson, 1998, p76

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[59] Wilson, 1998, p76

Verbal Engineering: A Practical Methodology

Introduction

This section of my overview draws on the experience of tutors and students who I was able to engage in discussion with some key questions about their experience of teaching and learning through the OCA method. Those questions focused on three main areas of their experience: the learning journal, the tutorial report, and the broader question of the essential nature of tuition mediated entirely through writing. So, in simple terms, questions that invited them to talk about their experience of the course components, the learning experience and the particular effectiveness and significance of the process.

Of the thirty eight tutors working for OCA in 1999, around a dozen responded to my invitation to reflect directly on their experience, some by letter, others by telephone and others in person. This fairly low response is not surprising given that levels of pay in the college were fairly basic and that tutors were paid per assignment - i.e. they were not retained as members of a department with responsibilities to the college beyond the tutoring of their own students. But a tutor development course held at the Arvon Foundation in March 1999 had brought together a further group of fourteen tutors and they had engaged in a wide range of discussions which touched upon course materials and methodology. No very neat divisions surfaced in the responses of those participants and the tutors who had responded in writing, but their notes and narratives did begin to add up into a picture of a tutorial method with unique properties and possibilities. This account will show a practical methodology, offer concrete examples of good practice, and explore the special implications of distance learning tutorials for creative writing.

The Open College of the Arts is an open-learning college and therefore has a very broad constituency of students with a significant drop-out rate, some years running as high as 30% of enrolled students. Comparisons with the National Extension College (NEC) and the Open University (OU)[60] have

[60] Explored in the joint-curriculum OCA/OU curriculum group convened in 1995 and through contact with NEC who seconded a marketing officer to OCA in 1998

shown that this is by no means unusual in distance learning. Reasons for students dropping out of courses are often difficult to ascertain, even difficult for the students themselves to understand or express. The enrolled student body in OCA can be seen to be defined by three categories - those interested mainly in recreation and self-discovery, those interested in accumulating credit points through writing, and those interested in writing as would-be professional artists. Nor are those categories hermetic or exclusive, since all OCA students have a choice as to whether they take up assessment and apply for academic credit, and this creates an unusually permissive climate. Only around 10% of students are assessed each year and of that number, only around 30% take up credit points[61].

The examples of tutorial reports here are drawn from my own responses over the past three years and all students are my own. My reports were monitored on an annual basis, like those of other tutors, so they are representative in terms of standard, form and content. All the students featured here have experience of other forms of creative writing tuition and most have undertaken distance learning writing courses in OCA at other levels and with other tutors. Some are teachers who themselves now tutor creative writing students, so they form an articulate and thoughtful study group able to extrapolate their own experience into the general principles underlying the process. All students represented here were engaged on Level 2 or Level 3 courses and functioning at HE standard.

Context

Since the 1960's, the OU and NEC in academic subjects, and OCA in arts education, have developed distance learning in the UK into a systematic and accredited option which can bring students into the learning process with no qualifications and send them out with a GCSE's, 'A' Levels, NVQ's, academic credit points or a degree. Private, and sometimes less reputable, distance learning colleges still offer correspondence courses in a range of subjects - especially creative writing and journalism - which are widely advertised in UK newspapers. As an independent college OCA has always had to distance

[61] Based on average figures rather than hard statistical research - the fact that students do not strictly conform to academic terms and annual assessment events has always made it difficult to compile statistics which clearly show activity within a particular year and such hard research has not been felt to be worth serious investment by the College

itself from commercial enterprises which offer 'publication-or-money-back' guarantees, hence our affiliation agreements with the OU and NEC and our scrupulousness in avoiding a commercial bias to the courses themselves.

The IT revolution is speeding up our ability to learn on-line and existing HE institutions are rapidly trying to assimilate distance learning into existing programmes whilst new enterprises like the University for Industry, set up to develop the applied science and technical skills-base in the UK, are developing entirely new 'e-learning' programmes in their own right. Distance learning post-graduate degrees in creative writing have been set up at a number of UK universities,[62] tele-medicine[63] is being introduced into the National Health Service, and it is possible to buy a CD-ROM at any motorway service station which can deliver a learning programme through the home PC.

Louise Moran, writing of the Australian experience, where distance learning has a long pedigree due to the huge distances involved in communication between individuals and communities, describes the increasing application of distance learning:

> Distance-education has moved, in some jurisdictions, from the political and educational margins into a position where it is viewed by governments and institutions as a mainstream educational process. Distance learning methods and information technologies are converging with classroom strategies to create what will be a substantially different and exciting educational environment. In so doing, they present intriguing challenges to deeply embedded norms and values, to organisational systems and structures, and to university cultures.[64]

This convergence of mainstream teaching methods and new information technology delivering distance-education is often characterised as 'flexible learning'. This not only describes a flexible delivery method which can be incremental, time-efficient and controlled by the student, but an entire concept of learning, credit-accumulation and certification that can be tailored to a wider constituency of students than has ever been reached before, including the disabled, the elderly, the geographically isolated, and those constrained by domestic or familial commitments.

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[62] e.g. Lancaster University, 1998, MA, the University of Glamorgan, MA 1993, MPhil 1995

[63] Where video-images of dermatological and other observable conditions are relayed to consultants and used as diagnostic aids

[64] Brown, 1997, p171

The community of students within the OCA courses demonstrates this catholicity[65] : 65% -70% of students enrolling on the courses are women, often with young children. A small number - around 2% - are registered disabled. A significant number also admit to suffering or recovering from debilitating physical or mental illnesses, though this is only revealed through correspondence with their tutor and rarely logged on their student profile form[66]. For the same reasons of social isolation, the courses also enrol many middle-aged and elderly students, and others living in remote geographic regions.

An interesting development in this pattern is that OCA writing courses now have a growing number of overseas students[67] - mainly in Africa, Asia and Europe. This has led to tutors offering e-mail tuition in a network that makes it almost as easy for a student in Oslo, Marseilles, Tokyo or Athens to take a course as a student in Keighley or East Grinstead. The essential transaction remains the same, and as more and more members of the UK and expatriate English-speaking community buy computers and go on-line, exotic postage stamps will be replaced by e-mail addresses that blur geographic distinctions and shrink distances even further.

Economic expediency may be a crucial factor in the development of the new university courses, but so is a growing recognition that distance learning is now far from a second-best option. With the development of the 'virtual university' comes the celebration of the unique methodologies that distance learning can bring to the learning process. Any educational system will work best when there is convergence between the knowledge and techniques to be learned and the pedagogic medium itself. Face-to face teaching in creative writing is problematic in a number of ways, especially as the size of tutorial, lecture and seminar groups grows. Students compete for air-time in workshops and tutors are forced to convey ideas and examples through verbal exposition - however inspirational the tutor and however assiduous the student, such methods are prone to opacity. Self-directed learning, such as the CD-ROM materials currently being developed by Sheffield Hallam

[65] Outline figures derived from annual OCA questionnaires - many students decline to return these and others do not complete their student profile forms, so 'hard' figures are difficult to arrive at, though overall trends are discernible

[66] A simple information sheet on which an OCA student can volunteer personal and educational information to facilitate the tutorial relationship

[67] Somewhere around 3%, but again figures are hard to resolve since not all these students are resident overseas all the time

University[68] involve interaction with a computer programme rather than a tutor, so whilst useful, are also somewhat circumscribed.

Unlike painting, dance, photography or music, creative writing teaching largely lacks a practical vocabulary. The concepts of literary criticism do not necessarily inform the creative process and even seasoned academics in the field of literature become mere beginners in creative workshops. Language, the most mercurial of media, is notoriously resistant to methodology. Every new piece of writing creates and solves new problems, new distances which the writing has to bridge, and that is a lesson which every writer has to learn - there are no permanent solutions, no fixed termini, only points of consolidation which lead to new problems and further solutions. There are formulas for formulaic writing, but OCA's aim in HE creative writing is to link self-expression to rigour, spontaneity to reflection, structure to surprise, imitation to originality. Such felicities are easy to recognise, but difficult to bring about or to nurture unless the students' work can somehow be kept in a state of flux throughout the process.

A visual arts tutor takes a student's drawing and re-draws a line, a music teacher plays back a student's composition with new accents and notes, a photographer scans a student's photograph into their computer and electronically edits it, a dance tutor performs the solution to a difficult piece of choreography. In learning in the arts the tutor is able to 'show not tell', so enacting one of the key concepts in the writing tutor's stock advice. All those techniques are transferable to distance learning, but few so seamlessly as writing, where a new kind of clarity is engendered. Distance learning allows a professional practitioner to interact with a student's writing whilst it is still fluid and this process can be speeded-up and intensified by the ability to share work in electronic form.

Distance Learning

The essential difference between any model of distance learning and face-to face tuition is that the student is not in direct physical contact with the tutor. For the purposes of this overview I wish to set aside the notion of video-

[68] 'Versewriter' and 'Storywriter' are CD-Rom modules designed to develop technical and aesthetic skills in poetry and short fiction and to work independently of a tutor or print-based materials

conferencing, which, though mediated through distance, is, literally, a face-to-face method. In distance learning it can be argued that one layer of opacity particular to face-to-face contact is stripped away: the transient body-language and inter-personal chemistry that support our verbal utterances but which also imbue them with a degree of ambiguity. Several students commented on this factor in relation to the permanence of the tutorial response in distance learning:

The great thing about distance learning is that written reports can be read over and over. I have tangible records of tutor responses to my work, so there's no struggling to remember what they've said; I can check my files. They can be re-read and re-interpreted, which is just as well. Some are glowing, but have undercurrents of hard reality which I may not take in until the second time through. Others I crossly stuff back in the envelope and only notice the light praise gleaming through stony words a week later. What I take from the reports is therefore less dependent on mood, personal circumstances and what I remember or record than a face-to-face tutorial[69].

And:

I guess the distance learning relationship offers comments that can be taken in time and time again and dwelt on - because they are written rather than ephemeral verbal responses...that is the **key** benefit here - because they are so full and written down you can revisit them in a different state of mind and development and then see and take something different from that experience - I even sometimes review the whole course together, all six units....I could see the pattern of initial encouragement, pushing hard in the middle and then positive reinforcement at the end of the course[70].

And:

I think it probable that the tutor thinks much more carefully about what he/she says since it's not easy to fudge and smooth over utterances in the way that's more possible face-to-face...By their very nature, even if one takes notes, live tutorials are ephemeral...I think interpersonal factors and anxieties, e.g. *Does he/she like me?* and endlessly replaying and interpreting body language and utterances can easily take over from straight hearing of textual feedback. I guess all of this is intensified and skewed even further by imbalances of power between tutor and student[71].

It can be argued then, as one student observed, that 'writing works for

[69] OCA Student B, Poetry Level 2 and Advanced Poetry , Level 3
[70] OCA Student C,Poetry Level 2 , Advanced Poetry, Level 3
[71] OCA Student D,Poetry Level 2

writing',[72] that the distance learning relationship overcomes another kind of inter-personal distance, and that, in another student's words, the players are '...freed from face-to-face body language, presences and all the other contact that goes on which can obscure the focus on the work and writing and writer's development'[73] . The tight focus and richness of this writer-to-writer contact is not merely a by-product of the distance learning process, but a direct result of the convergence of pedagogic, reflective and creative media: for writing students sensitised to language and its nuances, this is a significant aspect of the experience.

So, distance learning has the potential to reduce inter-personal distance between tutor and student, allowing them - through the very medium of their art form - to participate in an almost seamless tutorial process once the course is under way. This relationship is also incremental: feedback is intensified at strategic points, criticism tempered with encouragement at others, and the whole process written down:

> Because the tutor writes about a student's work in some detail the interaction is more intense and more focused than it can be in a workshop with a number of participants. Through that interaction it is possible for the tutor to be instrumental in shaping the student's sense of themself as a writer (for good or ill). The experience can be both more powerful and more controlled than in face-to-face encounters... Even so it removes many of the strains I find in face-to-face teaching. The interaction is circumscribed and focused in a way live tutorials never are and the student's development seems to be more apparent because a concrete record of it exists[74] .

This is not to say that distance learning relationships are always successful in personal terms or an argument against face-to-face contact between student and tutor. But a tutorial process that allies responsiveness to the maintenance of a permanent record is a hugely advantageous one, allowing the students to learn strategically and incrementally and the tutor to teach in the same way.

The Learning Journal[75]

Learning journals on the OCA courses began as correspondence between the students and their tutors, initially letters which introduced the assignment

[72] OCA Student B, Poetry Level 2, Advanced Poetry Level 3
[73] OCA Student C, poetry Level 2, Advanced Poetry, Level 3
[74] OCA Tutor A, Fiction and Life Writing
[75] See , Appendix 1, p92

they had worked on to their tutor, outlining any problems or sense of achievement that they had experienced. Feedback at tutor development meetings rapidly established that the most fruitful tutorials resulted from the most detailed correspondence, and the information in the coursebook was intensified to encourage this process. The Course Committee devised a means of formalising this process, as described earlier, and by 1996, the term 'learning journal' had been adopted to describe the reflective process. The formalisation of the journal was followed by its integration into the assessment process and the profile of this aspect of the course has been progressively raised so that it can now contribute to a student's final grade if they are formally assessed.

The learning journal contained three main elements: the correspondence that passed between the student and and their tutor, all drafts of creative work, and all additional notes and observations derived from the student's own research. From these elements a 'core element' - that seen by the tutor - was identified and this consisted of final drafts and reflective correspondence. This both broadened the concept of a learning journal to make it a narrative of the whole course, and allowed the student to identify key elements that could pass through the postal system in a pragmatic way; it also clearly identified private and public aspects of the reflective process. The learning journal was issued as a folder with clear instructions and work was clipped into its sub-sections as it accumulated, so it was always a practical rather than an abstract concept.

The concept of the learning journal was developed empirically, but Anne Brockbank and Ian McGill describe a fundamental rationale for the reflective process which resonates strongly with the OCA experience:

> If the purpose of institutions of higher education is to encourage the move beyond the transmissive to the transformative, then it should be a fundamental condition of the student's experience - whether diplomate, undergraduate or post-graduate, full or part-time - that relationship is crucial to learning. By the term relationship we mean situations are created where teachers and learners (and learners together) can actively reflect upon the issues and material before them, eg seminars and tutorials.[76]

The contrasts with the OCA experience are important here as well as the similarities. The teaching of writing in OCA is essentially practical rather than theoretical, so the very emphasis on process implies a transformative (of the

[76] Brockbank & McGill, 1998, p5

individual and the creative material) rather than a transmissive approach. Creative writing itself also attempts this act of transformation through its conveyance of the reader into and through imaginative experience, which has a transformative rather than instructive effect. The creation of peer-relationships is admittedly very difficult - except on OCA residential courses which serve that function very effectively - but the relationship with the tutor finds an intensity through distance learning which is difficult to achieve in any group seminar or tutorial.

Learning journals are a somewhat contentious issue in HE and, unless embedded in the tutorial relationship, may form little more than a rather self-conscious diary: a formal requirement rather than a structural necessity, of the course. There is a rhetorical quality to such learning journals, which may explain the discomfort students feel about maintaining them. Whilst acknowledging that, 'Tutors are often disappointed by the tentative use that students make of them,' (and this also accords with the OCA experience), and in the the context of face-to-face English Studies at Leeds University, Dr. Rebecca O'Rourke says:

> The learning journal is a powerful tool for developing student confidence and cognitive ability in ways which embed and extend learning in the core modules comprising their programmes of study. Independent learning through the medium of writing is at the heart of the learning journal project....When the learning journal is an active, experiential study aid it can help students move from surface to deep learning both within and across modules.[77]

Whilst acknowledging all those attributes, especially the enabling of a deeper engagement with the *learning* process, the OCA learning journal extends the notion of reflection by embedding itself at all stages in the *writing* process. The journal is not simply a framework for reflective writing, but accumulates the whole experience of the course between its covers. Furthermore, reflection is seen as a process *to* which the tutor responds and *in* which they participate directly. The journal forms the keystone of the personal and professional relationship between tutor and student and contains not only the student's thoughts and reflections but, crucially, the tutor's own reflection and response to them. The following examples offers a glimpse of this process.

Student:

[77] O'Rourke, 1998, p403

Well, finally here's the strange brew that has been bred out of the Art & Poetry course and your remit to try narrative. They represent some of the work at least from that course with Carole Satyamurti and Greg Warren Wilson, plus a couple of poems arising from paintings I viewed in addition to those set by the course and a few others that emerged from the same brood of thinking. I think your idea of trying narrative has led me into strange mazes and I'm not sure I've found my way out yet. I felt that the poems were still in flux and I'm not sure if they worked and for a while I wasn't at all sure what they were about - as I have rested them and gone back to them I kept discovering new dimensions of meaning. Today, looking at them again, they felt at least finished for this present time - I think they have gone as far as they could without a long gap now, or sending away to you. I think you are right that I may learn from these but as yet I'm not sure what, and I'm still not certain about many features of them.[78]

Tutor:

Many thanks for this latest assignment and for the very detailed and stimulating assignment commentary. I was interested that you've chosen to base almost all this batch on paintings, since I come fresh from a project in the Walker and Williamson art galleries in Liverpool and Birkenhead. The interest in paintings for me lies in the elements of time and energy they encompass. There's the sense of layers of paint being built up in any painting, the breath of the artist against the canvas as they labour, the gradual coming together of the image. I like the way painters incorporate their mistakes and paint over them and I find the narrative quality in figurative work compelling - the way narratives are compressed and suggested through symbols and signs in the image itself. That, for me, is the clear interface with the enterprise of poetry. [79]

These preambles are taken from a middle point in the course, and one which shows student and tutor engaging very closely in the exchange of ideas about approaches to the writing of poetry, with specific reference to writing stimulated by visual art. There is nothing rhetorical in either passage, they form a direct conduit of communication, response and counter-response in the unfolding of the dialogue. Those general remarks encapsulate the creative work itself and both student and tutor go on to write about each poem in detail, so that the tutor is responding not only to the poems, but to the student's thoughts and feeling about the poems:

Dead Fish poem (Student):

- seems as good a place to start as any! (oh what an unconscious link was made then...) - this poem - I just love the title - forget the poem - right - ok - grab the poem - it's gone through some eel-like manoeuvres and proved very difficult to put on the page - I have just re-read my first

[78] OCA Student C, Level 2 Poetry and Advanced Poetry, Level 3
[79] OCA Advanced Poetry tutor, Graham Mort

tentative thoughts that i made before trying to tackle this poem and they tell me what i wanted to try and say. I think I have managed to **show** these things and have with drawn a lot of earlier lines and pieces that were me telling me what I really wanted to say. My main concern now is whether it is too allusive for a reader and whether it lets them in sufficiently...[80]

Dead Fish poem (Tutor):

i found the narrative thrust of this quite compelling, the way the whole story is mediated through that very vivid evocation of *things* - the eggs and the dead fish with their strange eyes. Sylvia Plath said: 'i love the thingness of things,' and i know what she means. There's something irreducible in their presence and yet they also function as symbols - here the eggs represent the possibility of life, but a thwarted life in the case of the unborn birds. They also represent fragility, I think. The fish is a powerful Christian symbol, loaves and fishes representing the miraculous and in this painting (leaving the poem aside for a second) we sense that the story is all about transformation ....This brings me to the question: how is the poem like a painting? There's a clear connection here with the words being laid on the pages like brushstrokes and the highly visual quality of the narration. The use of frames defines that further, but what is the relationship between the narrator and the image they're creating?[81]

I have deliberately selected these passages because neither student nor tutor yet deals directly with the *language* of the poem. These exchanges, which are leading to the hands-on exploration of technique, wrap the poem in a discourse which is developed continuously around each assignment. There's an urgency evident in the student's writing - note those slips from formal English usage - and to the tutor's response. It is almost a conversational quality, but this time we have a permanent record of the exchange. Furthermore, despite the apparent spontaneity, both tutor and student have revised their writing about the poem, so it represents both immediate response and refinement of the original thought.

Interestingly, the exchange stands as a discussion of poetry even without the poem being present. Through the monitoring exercises at OCA we became aware that any set of tutorial responses could be read in this way as a unique and free-standing discourse without the creative work being present. Here's what the same student wrote to me in response to my questions about her view of this process:

Writing that reflective commentary with each assignment means revisiting the tutor's report and examining it in the light of work produced. That can be very useful and another level of

[80] OCA Student C, Level 2 Poetry, Advanced Poetry, Level 3
[81] OCA Advanced Poetry tutor, Graham Mort

discovery. I only write that final accompanying commentary when I'm ready to send the assignment off - the comments may have been composting and developing but I write it fresh and again a learning process takes place as I write it...It makes me evaluate more carefully as I have to stand back and think what I can write to the tutor. I can and do question how I feel about the work and wonder why and offer some ideas which the tutor can respond to when they see the work. The reply often doesn't match up what I feel about the work and makes me view it differently.[82]

That response is amplified by a tutor who recognises the same process in her feedback:

Obviously one does have to be flexible and often ponder at great length, in order for example, to discover meanings in the text that students haven't recognised for themselves.[83]

This notion of reflection involves taking into account the *intention* of the student, a contentious issue in the realm of literary criticism, where authorial intention may be seen as irrelevant to textual analysis. But the relationship between student and tutor takes place within convergent criteria: those of the course and its learning outcomes, those of the writer's need for self-expression, those of the tutor (related to but not always identical to those of the course), and those exerted by the writing itself - by what actually happens. In the words of David Best:

The work of art is a criterion of the artist's intention; it is normally what identifies that intention....Of course the work is not always and necessarily what the artist intended, any more than in other contexts, one always and necessarily achieves what one intends.[84]

This forms part of Best's argument for rationality of response, and for the understanding of art being inseparable from what we call an 'emotional response' to it. He further argues for the underpinning of arts education by the development of such educated feeling, in order to facilitate a depth of response in the audience or reader.

The learning journal essentially enables this process, where criteria embedded in the work of art and the criteria expressed by the writer can be

exposed to the consideration of a tutor who bring their own criteria and invoke

[82] OCA Student C, Level 2 Poetry, Advanced Poetry, Level 3
[83] OCA Tutor B, Fiction
[84] Best, 1985, p124

those of the course. This aspect of the learning journal can be seen as a kind of refraction - the student sends frequencies of light towards the tutor and those frequencies are absorbed and sent back at a slightly different angle, split apart and re-united to reveal a different spectrum of effects. The notion of distance finds a new metaphor in this 'angle of incidence', the gap between intention and effect, because it is in this gap that the possibilities for learning and for change occur.

Those possibilities for change are, of course, not confined to the student:

> For reflective dialogue to take place, a particular kind of relationship is required between teachers and learners. The relationship is one where learners and teachers engage and work together so that they jointly construct meaning and knowledge with the material. The material and how it is worked on is a product of that relation between those in dialogue. The material is not out there, detached and unconnected. In the conditions of reflective dialogue there is the possibility of moving beyond taken-for-granted assumptions and paradigms of the learner's world, and the possibility also for the teacher to review her meanings within her own scholarship.[85]

The account of the tutorial report below moves into this field of student and tutor literally 'working the material' (in our case, the creative writing) together. There's a combativeness in Brockbank and McGill's eagerness to dissolve 'taken-for-granted-assumptions' and 'paradigms of the learner's world', but in the context of 'scholarship' rather than creative process. In the creative process mediated through distance learning such dissolution seems natural, essential and above-all, *necessary* to the process.

The Tutorial Report

The use of writing as the common medium of creative expression, reflection and feedback carries a further and very significant possibility forward into the tutorial process. This was focused for me at a meeting at Sheffield Hallam University[86] in which Dr. Stephen Wade (Huddersfield University) somewhat despairingly raised the question of how one deals with student work in a face-to-face situation - i.e. how one finds a practical way to read previously unseen work and to help the student whilst protecting their feelings and making progress possible.

[85] Brockbank & McGill, 1998. p5
[86] October 14th 1999, Creative Writing in HE forum

That situation is not only constrained by the exigencies of diplomacy, but by time itself. Once the student's work arrives cold on the page, it is very hard to lift it off again. This is not true of the distance learning process where the student's work arrives encapsulated in an ongoing discussion, both philosophical and practical, and where the tutor has the opportunity not only to formulate a response, but a strategy for development.

In distance learning there is a ductile quality to the student's writing which means that the tutor is able to intervene directly, re-writing key lines or passages in order to suggest alternative drafts. So drafting is not confined to the student alone: it is a shared process. Such drafting can be seen as an extension of reading, a kind of 'kinetic reading' in which the tutor acts out possibilities in the writing, corresponding in many ways to the reader-response theory which says that the reader is the maker of meaning in a text and that meaning is 'no longer and object to be defined, but an effect to be experienced.'[87] But in this case, that 'maker' is also a practising writer with the skills of literary fabrication, a point picked up by one student in relationship to the of writer-to-writer relationship:

> And I guess writers' texts (maybe any artists' shared works) do present a peculiar kind of bridge in this respect...Maybe you get a similar sense to this is you're a fellow engineer and you look at someone else's design, or circuit diagram.[88]

Here are a some of examples of this process taken from a tutor's report:

> ....You also tend to use different methods of laying out the dialogue, sometimes incorporating it into paragraphs and sometimes laying it out more like a play script. The play script technique is, literally, more dramatic and pulls the speech clear of the action, allowing both to move on quite quickly:
>
> 'What the fuck are you doing, Gul?'
> The male nurse pulls my head back by the hair.
> 'Get your fucking hand out of your throat!'
> A burning, bleeding gurgle fills me. I keep ramming the inside of my throat with my fingers. Need more time...I struggle free.
> 'Get your fucking fingers out of your mouth!'
> He pushes me forward.

[87] Freund, E, 1987, p143
[88] OCA Student D, Level 2 Poetry

'Now!'
I've got to get it out. He pushes me over.

This might help to consolidate some pages, making the paragraph breaks more logical. It also juxtaposes different kinds of writing in a way which means that the reader can follow interior monologue, narrative and dialogue as separate 'soundtracks'. It also makes it easier for you to work on, I think.[89]

And:

One clue to how you might develop your writing style comes on p6 when you say, 'Eugene and I flew to Naples this evening.' You immediately back-track on this statement by adding, 'It wasn't until a few days ago that I discovered...' and thereafter you write in the past tense about the experience. I wonder if exploring a present-tense narrative might help to give immediacy to the writing and help you to focus on the here-and-now nature of the relationship. The past tense gives you liberty to splice in other information quite easily: ' We intended to rise early the next morning and head south to the Amalfi coast. Living in London, we both wanted peace and quiet. Naples has architectural treasures and is wonderfully situated on the sea, but peaceful and quiet it is not.' But the present tense creates a slightly different pressure to remain within the present moment, I think: 'The next morning we rise early as intended. Living in London, we both want peace and quiet. As we pack, a gecko flickers along the window-ledge above constant traffic. I watch Eugene as he stuffs his shirts into a sports bag. The blond hairs on his arms look like the fine down on a baby's head.' It's just that moment of standing back that helps the reader to understand him as a more three-dimensional figure, whereas at the moment he still seems to be a little embedded in the writer's consciousness rather than separated out; there's a sense of mental separation but he's not physically distinct, so our sense of him as an important individual is limited.[90]

And:

The poem builds up sense impressions almost relentlessly with that intensification in stanza three, so that the refrain arriving again is almost a release. That moment in the poem signals a change from past to present tense and I might give that heron a definite article just to make sure the reader crosses over with you - 'that heron' perhaps. The 'hydra-heads' give the following stanza a nightmarish, aqueous quality, which takes us by surprise. Then that sudden shift of attention to your hand and the 'elder jets' (wonder if 'elder-jet' might get the idea of blackness across slightly more directly?). I like the way you drop the refrain here, resisting some kind of naff symmetry, and those final lines seem, to move us much closer to a joined-up sense of things. The 'purple milk' of the elderberries and the sense of them being a bruise in the mouth gives the poem a sense of closure because the bitten fruit is a distillation of sadness and hurt and lostopportunity. So the poem itself becomes concentrated and focused through a transforming image that disturbs us both emotionally and through its unusual and compelling use of

[89] OCA Fiction Tutor , Graham Mort to OCA Student E, Advanced Fiction, Level 3
[90] OCA Life Writing tutor, Graham Mort, to OCA student F, Lifelines, Level 1

language: the kind of synthesis of new sensations and realisations that I talked about earlier.[91]

And:

The last verse of 'Spitzbergen' huffs and puffs uphill a bit, I think. Do we need such a specific time-reference (o.k. I know the story) and two lots of whales? Lets make that powerful noun 'splinters' into a verb:

> The bones of whalers splinter
> through the ground.
> Beside the blubber ovens a skull
> still looks out.
> That exposes 'ground' as weak. So:
> The bones of whalers splinter
> through permafrost; beside the
> blubber ovens a skull
> still stares from its look-out.

or you could do a million other things with it. That reinforces another general point too - when you're getting wordy, get hold of the verbs and nouns and see what they can do for you if you swap them about and ask more of them.[92]

And finally:

I really like the movement in this poem, the way you create a sense of space and positional relationships in the landscape. The focus on each moment of perception remains very tight and the language is held to its task without strain or affectation. There's a lovely movement too from oppression (the distant rain) to a kind of visionary liberation. It's very unforced but the reader feels a relationship working beneath the poem; a relationship that has moved on from some constriction towards a kind of sharing. The gift of the shell seems a catalyst for a sudden sense of hope in the future. It's funny how a mouthful of a word like 'opalescent' just sounds so lovely. I hesitated a couple of times on the way through and I wonder if the first stanza could be pared little to draw less obvious attention to the simile:

> Behind us, a headache
> weight of distant rain
> presses the mountains.

I was slightly hesitant over the word 'presented' in stanza 3 too. I know its a deliberate use of the idea of a display case, but that comes clear in the final line. It might be worth searching out a more arresting verb there. Do you need to follow 'cumulus' with clouds? Why not:

[91] OCA Poetry tutor, Graham Mort to OCA Student C, Advanced Poetry, Level 3
[92] OCA Poetry tutor, Graham Mort to OCA Student D, Level 2 Poetry

Fat cumulus, gilt-edged
rays of sun....

I think a little paring might actually burnish the poem and create those spaces for the reader to inhabit.[93]

Re-reading these tutorial reports now, I'm struck by my own desire to re-work and qualify my comments, even in the absence of the original writing and, I think, this shows that the tutorial process itself is essentially fluid, attempting to develop the writing through hands-on re-working of lines and passages. The student presents problems to the tutor, but the tutor's solution and responses are embedded in their own work as writers rather than in a body of *de facto* knowledge which they must transmit to the student.

A discursive style is deployed in the introductory section of the tutorial report, and those ideas are then connected up through the examples of the student's writing. In order to form a coherent narrative that is more than a set of jotted notes, examples of the student's work have to be imported (a process made much easier by e-mail rather than hard-copy exchange) as reference points. So the tutor's discourse is acted out around examples of the student's work and sometimes also set beside that of other writers. This takes potentially rather abstract ideas such as the effect of punctuation in dialogue, the use of metaphor, the transitions of tense, or the effects of line-endings in a poem, and gives them an absolutely concrete referent within the student's endeavour to create a poem, story, novel.

The second main use of this technique - to demonstrate alternatives - violates one of the key taboos of tutorial practice, which is to regard the student's work as a kind of sanctified text which must not be interfered with. One root of this attitude is good teaching practice - respect for the student's endeavour - but the other is our western consciousness of the artist as an inspired and inviolate *individual*. But good writing teaching is all about meltdown - keeping the text fluid for as long as possible and, at the point of delivery, in recognising and anticipating the role of the reader in imaginatively re-constructing the text. The writer is, implicitly, in partnership with an unknown reader. Because the tutor is an active, known and responsive reader who can use their own

[93] OCA Poetry tutor, Graham Mort to OCA Student B, Advanced Poetry, Level 3

experience (as a writer *and* reader) to gauge the texture and content of the writing, then the student writer is able to develop their work towards its final audience with more confidence.

Distance learning students themselves recognise the value of this hands-on re-tooling of the text:

With any creative work there's a point where I can't see clearly any more. Leaving it unseen for a week or so helps, but at a certain point it needs fresh eyes, or an audience to catch the nuances I've missed or didn't intend. Redrafting by the tutor gives a poem a kick over the hump where it has stuck.[94]

And:

Hands on re-drafting - that is interesting - it will instil a doubt and make me look at something again. It often links with a tiny feeling that I might be having but ignoring and that is useful. You listen when the tutor expresses that feeling in a hands on approach - I've always found the on-draft of rewriting of phrases helpful and intriguing. I may not always agree straight away - rarely never . I often come round, but I am also aware that my own instinct has to be followed as well, so I wouldn't just accept something. It raises questions, forces me to justify and re-assess, which is healthy and part of the learning process.[95]

And:

I think for me, this has been the most beneficial intervention. Perhaps the crucial thing has been the specific reworking of examples because these help me to really see and hear alternatives and set me thinking again/afresh - no mean achievement on some pieces of work that I've thought 'set' or finished. I don't always agree with alteration, but usually there's the excitement of thinking, 'Yes, why couldn't it see or hear that. it's so much better?' I hope I'm learning to anticipate some of these points for myself and can ride a bit further and faster without stabilisers. It's so much more powerful then generalised or bland advice that's hard to apply.[96]

Far from insisting on the sanctity of their work, students recognise the contribution of the tutor as a practising artist as a pivotal one that can set their work on a new trajectory or adjust its existing flight-path.

[94] OCA Student B, Advanced Poetry, Level 3
[95] OCA Student C, Advanced Poetry , Level 3
[96] OCA Student D, Poetry, Level 2

Virtual Education

The notion of distance learning as necessary to the new learning environments, though somehow second-best, can be vigorously challenged in the creative writing context. Distance learning in creative writing can address core issues in the educational process and embed them in a written transaction which has both spontaneous and formal elements. The two-way transmission of ideas through writing is able to create a practical process of intervention and to encapsulate it in meaningful discourse to which both student and tutor contribute and which provokes further creative and reflective writing. Each fully-collated learning journal forms a folio of original writing plus the record of a unique research project which creates a synthesis of creative impulse, drafting, reflection and critical perspective, enriching the intellectual content of the course through its very process. The idea of literal distance is challenged by this process and by aspects of the IT revolution; in this context, no two people need be further away from each other than their e-mail address books.

I argued earlier that the concept of distance itself needs to be redefined to acknowledge only the gap between tutor and student as individuals at respective points in the learning process. That gap can be bridged spectacularly through the intensity and intimacy of the distance learning relationship:

> One of the things I find strange when tutoring is the extent to which I temporarily feel as thought I *am* the student. Part of me is still the (detached) tutor, but in order to help a student develop the piece of writing further, I have to make myself inhabit the piece and believe it's mine. In offering solutions to the student, I then feel free to propose radical solutions - in a way that I wouldn't dare to, if I'd kept the piece at arms length. I feel this blurring of boundaries much more strongly when engaged in OCA (distance learning work) than in the face-to-face teaching I do.[97]

This susceptibility is the very aim of the writing itself as defined by Wolfgang Iser:

> Often the term 'identification' is used as if it were an explanation whereas in actual fact it is no more than a description. What is normally meant by 'identification' is the establishment of

[97] OCA Tutor C, poetry

affinities between oneself and someone outside oneself - a familiar ground on which we are able to experience the unfamiliar. The author's aim though, is to convey the experience and, above all, an attitude towards that experience. Consequently, 'identification' is not an end in itself, but a stratagem by means of which the author stimulates attitudes in the reader.[98]

But susceptibility to the writing is tempered by the 'radical solutions' to its problems. Here the tutor is not identifying with the fictional world of the story or poem (though she may do that as well), but with the writerly consciousness of the author - so that an aspect of the reading process is re-deployed into an educational strategy. Iser goes on to say the following, with reference to Georges Poulet's notion of summoning a work of literature into existence through placing 'consciousness at its disposal"[99]:

....It follows that the work itself must be thought of as a consciousness, because only in this way is there an adequate basis for the author-reader relationship - a relationship that can only come about through the negation of the author's own life-story and the reader's own disposition.... Without an act of recreation the object is not perceived as a work of art.[100]

In this context of tutor/student identification in response to the creative work being shaped, the process of distance learning tuition itself can be understood as an integration of tutor-student, reader-writer creative consciousness which seeks to enrol the consciousness of a third party - the imaginatively designated reader, or 'implied reader'[101] of the piece. This complex interplay of student and tutor, this subtle complicity of the tutor in the student's authorship, shows a peculiarly intense convergence of intention, rather than any reduction in consciousness caused by the lack of direct inter-personal contact that 'distance learning' implies. The deployment of writing at all stages in the learning process creates a synthesis of creative, reflective and pedagogic writing, each form of address summoning the reader into an imaginative engagement with what is being expressed.

Many aspects of the student/tutor relationship presented in this overview would not always be identifiable in such highly developed form - at HE entry-level, for instance - and, clearly, distance learning suits the predispositions and personal circumstances of some students far better than others. But the traditional notion of distance learning is redefined by IT learning systems

[98] Lodge, 1988, p 202,quoting Iser, 1972
[99] Poulet, 1969, p54
[100] Lodge, 1988, p203, quoting Iser, New Literary History 3, 1972
[101] Freund, 1987, p143

where distance is not geographical, but systemic: the distance between the computer operator and the programme they seek to access.

Aspects of the interchange that I've described above inevitably form part of the face-to-face relationship in creative writing education, and I'm not arguing for the pitching of one teaching method above another. But distance learning mediated through new IT technology will inevitably form part of increasingly diverse provision in creative writing tuition as well as in other areas of education. The distance learning model, in its most developed form, offers an intensification of certain aspects of the relationship between a writing tutor and student and those aspects gain a particular resonance from the written nature of the interchange, so that tutor and student, reader and writer, are linked in an intimate and reflexive process capable of producing a very high standard of student work and tutor response.

Nor am I arguing for distance learning in isolation - since all academic programmes vary in their content and emphasis - but as a key component in an integrated programme of learning which might also contain lectures, seminars and tutorials. Distance as we once understood it has evaporated in the heat of the IT revolution. What we once thought of as spatial, then temporal distance, becomes merely the distance between key-strokes. The actual distance we need to bridge is the distance or *difference in consciousness* between individuals - the distance between writer and reader, student and tutor. The process of learning implies the reduction of that distance and, in creative writing tuition, distance learning methods provide such a process - practical, accessible, and deploying both the educational judgement and the hands-on creativity of a professional tutor.

There are interesting implications here for hybrid courses which link face-to-face contact with distance learning, or e-learning elements. When OCA collaborated with the Arvon Foundation in their 2000 programme[102] to pilot a course which offered a correspondence distance learning tutorial in advance of a face-to-face course, demand for places exceeded availability three times over. The development of the e-university is also throwing up interesting questions about the interface of technology and the role of teaching staff:

....We do not want to build a virtual university. Cardinal Newman introduced this term as a

[102] July, 2000

pejorative for universities that did not know their students as individuals. The e-university will have to use approaches such as individual learner logs and online human tutors to ensure it meets Newman's idea of a real university.[103]

The idea that technology will replace human interaction is predicated on the notion of downloadable bytes of knowledge, of interaction with programmes rather than people. However, for the process of learning in creative writing, information-technology promises a more intimate, more immediate interface, offering close relationships between teachers and learners and the extension of a well-founded pedagogic methodology. In future, this could link downloadable interactive resources to an on-line learning journal and direct feedback from a tutor, whilst extending the notion of the creative text itself.

[103]O'Shea, 2000

Implications of the OCA Network

When Romanian poet Paul Celan described his poems as 'messages in bottles' he was driving at a number of things: that a poem was a cry for help from the isolated artist to the world, that the poem itself was an artifact capable of autonomous communication, that it arrived without a cultural context, that it was a voyager able to conquer time and space, that it might never be read and, almost by definition, that the recipient of the poem might be unable to decipher or translate it into their own language. At a stroke, or rather at a metaphor, as we might expect, Celan defines both the infinite possibilities and the finite limitations of human language and poetic form. A distance learning course in creative writing also sets out burdened by finite mechanisms but in search of the infinite.

The act of disclosure involved in sending new creative work to a tutor is a defining step in the development of the work and also in the way in which the writer begins to understand it and themselves. As Alberto Manguel puts it:

> Since the earliest vestiges of prehistoric civilisation, human society had tried to overcome the obstacles of geography, the finality of death, the erosion of oblivion. With a single act - the incision of a figure on a clay tablet - that first anonymous writer suddenly succeeded in all these seemingly impossible feats.
>
> But writing is not the only invention that came to life in the instant of that first incision: one other creation took place at that same time. Because the purpose of the act of writing was that the text be rescued - that is to say, read - the incision simultaneously created a reader, a role that came into being before the actual first reader acquired a physical presence. As that first writer dreamed up a new art by making marks on a piece of clay, another art became tacitly apparent, one without which the markings would have been utterly meaningless.
>
> The primordial relationship between writer and reader presents a wonderful paradox: in creating the role of the reader, the writer also decrees the writer's death, since in order to be finished the writer must withdraw, cease to exist. While the writer remains present, the text remains incomplete. Only when the writer relinquishes the text, does the text come into existence. At that point , the existence of the text is a silent existence, silent until the moment in which a reader reads it.[104]

Manguel succinctly lays bare the fundamentals of the writing/reading process;

[104] Manguel,1995, p179

like Celan he sees the writing as being 'rescued' by the reader. His assumption though, is that writing moves across time and space towards its readership just once. This highlights the unique properties of a distance learning course devoted to writing: unlike a face-to face-course where the writer, in a sense, never withdraws from the work, or remains as an interpreter, the distance learning course accurately invents the isolation of both reader and writer in their respective points on the web of pedagogic and creative exchange.

The writing is drafted, revised, then posted. Both student and tutor await its arrival. For a moment, at least, both actors are isolated from an artifact moving between them through time and space. When the tutor unpacks the writing it comes wrapped in the student's learning journal or reflective writing. When the work is returned to the student it is arrives in the envelope of a new text - the tutor's response to it. In this sense distance learning can be said to both deploy the isolation that Manguel and Celan identify and to ameliorate it through the process of the 'semiotic web', the human and educational context for the work.

Esther Morgan, an OCA student, who went from the *Advanced* poetry course to the MA at the University of East Anglia where she became a member of teaching staff, expresses her sense of isolation and welcomes the finite as embodied in the course structure:

> I remember vividly with what trepidation I sent off my first assignment for The Experience of Poetry, but I felt that an important step had been taken in breaking the isolation in which I had been writing. I also hoped the course would provide a disciplined framework - it's so easy to relegate writing to those spare evenings which somehow never materialise! From the start I found my tutor's comments constructive and encouraging. As well as taking your work seriously the reports are invaluable as a written record to refer back to - something no workshop can provide.[105]

This student's evocation of isolation is one that all writers feel, but her comments on the accumulation of tutorial reports in the learning journal are revealing too. The journal assembles itself as the course progresses, logging drafts, tutorial reports,assignment commentaries, intermediate letters, notes and reviews. When it is completed by a student opting for academic

[105] Esther Morgan, OCA Creative Writing Prospectus , 1998

assessment, it gains a revised and fully developed assessment portfolio and a reflective account drawn from its own pages. Thus there comes into existence a complete record of the course which can also be seen as a narrative of the creative and pedagogic process. One of the attributes of writing is its permanence, the way in which language finds a relatively incorruptible form. As a consequence, one of the key attributes of distance learning is the laying down of a learning resource in relation to each individual student. Read from end to end, the tutor commentaries in the learning journal form a uniquely focused discourse.

A further feature of the pedagogic/creative exchange, as Manguel predicts, and one OCA student recognises here, is the invention of all the actors through the writing process:

> Poetry at the Advanced level is a singular enterprise. It is not unlike a secret adventure. To be a scribbler in a garret. A dealer in ideas. To be known and recognised virtually through one's writing alone. To deliver up this unique portrait.[106]

If writing - the poem, story, novel - invents the reader, then it also projects a sense of the writer, invites the reader's intuition of the authorial persona. In a distance learning context, the tutor and writer never meet in a physical sense. The tutor's sense of the student is established through formal aspects of registration - student profile, introductory letter, etc. - and the student's sense of the tutor is brought about through similar formal apparatus. The creative work - the student's and that of the tutor too - establishes a different, more powerful, more elusive persona, an authorial self that carries new messages and elicits new responses. That creative persona of the student is modified by their reflective selves, and the educative persona of the tutor is modified or amplified by the presence of their creative work.

When a tutor takes a short passage of the student's work and re-writes it in the tutorial report as an example of technique or narrative approach, then we can imagine that all four personae merge in the new text. This 'virtual world' of distance learning, with its powerful fictional spells and controlled elements of disclosure, is often bizarrely exploded when students actually meet their tutors on residential course. In its simplest form this might take the form of physical appearance, 'I thought he'd be taller and darker than he is.' But it also extends

[106] OCA Student H, Level 2 Poetry, from OCA Creative Writing Prospectus, 1998

to their creative 'aura', 'I thought he'd be more powerful, brooding, you know, *Celtic*!'[107]

The implications of pedagogic/creative exchange for the tutor are important ones that create a reflexive process between tutelage and their own writing:

> Teaching has taught me a lot. It's easy to get stuck into one way of seeing if you work by yourself. Students open my eyes to a wider world of possibilities, and my own poetry has benefited as a result.[108]

and

> The range of the courses, and of the students I meet doing them, brings me back to basic and important questions about writing again and again, and feeds my curiosity about new styles and new genres. I suspect I give best service to students when we are working on forms of writing that are not my specialism ...or not yet, because privately I want to have tried everything I teach.'[109]

Though OCA courses do not contain a syllabus and move from prescription to informed choice as the student ascends each level of study, we can see that the nature of the pedagogic process, its exchange of creative work and commentary, creates a developmental impetus that reaches from the tutor and the course to the student, then back from the student to the tutor. That natural process of the tutor's reflective or critical response to a student's work is intensified by the act of writing because the written report demands a structured, thought-out response, and because each report has to move the student further along in their creative voyage. As one OCA fiction tutor puts it: ' The powerful central idea of OCA creative writing is that tutors respond *as writers* to another writer's work - and it gets results.'[110]

New Developments

In 1997 OCA launched a pilot autobiographical writing course, *Lifelines*[111] . Created on the model of the other writing courses this intensifies the process of writing from personal experience, but also invites student to experiment with

[107] Overheard on OCA Arvon Foundation residential writing course, 1987
[108] OCA tutor C, from Creative Writing Prospectus, 1998
[109] OCA tutor D, from Creative Writing Prospectus, 1998
[110] OCA Tutor E, Fiction, from Creative Writing Prospectus, 1998
[111] Written by Reinhi Schullē & Brian Lewis, edited by Graham Mort

fictional techniques and new narrative structures. The exploration and disclosure of such highly personal material is made possible by the very distance between tutor and student; a new aspect to the especially discreet relationship between tutors and their students has thus begun to be revealed through this course. In the next year it is hoped to analyse the pilot scheme, create a Level 1-3 study pathway and to take the courses forward for accreditation.

A creative reading course *Reading Between The Lines*[112] was piloted in 1998/9. Devised as a partner to *Starting to Write*, the course covers the reading of poetry, short fiction, genre fiction, autobiography, the classic novel and literature in translation. At the heart of the course is an exploration of the reader's contribution to the writer's text and distance learning methods have been taken a step further with live group tuition through telephone conferencing. In this process, all six distance learning students in each 'cell' of students are able to speak simultaneously to their tutor and to each other about the books they are reading. The course involves writing about books as well as reading them and advocates expressive, rather than formal, reviewing techniques.

Launched in the UK National Year Of Reading in 1998, OCA has deliberately kept the options for accreditation open for this course, moving towards a structure of complementary writing/reading courses with academic credit points attached. This will create a partnership between reading and writing in which the reader is perceived as a significant actor in the process and in which the writer is able to the draw upon creative reading techniques and approaches in order to see their own work through the contribution they must ask a reader to make to it.

Rescuing the Writer

To return to Celan's metaphor of rescue: is signing up for a distance learning writing course a cry for help? From feedback sessions with tutors and from hundreds of telephone conversations from prospective students during my time as Creative Writing Course Leader, I learned that many students decide

[112] Written by Rachel van Riel & Olive Fowler, edited by Graham Mort

to enrol on a course at a critical time in their lives. This may be a time of mourning after the death of a partner, the anxiety of pregnancy, the void of children leaving home, the onset of early retirement, redundancy or illness. Equally, the desire to take a distance learning course may proceed from a sense of opportunity, perhaps having survived any of a number of traumas, from ME to a messy divorce. When a human being is put under pressure they often turn to our deepest and most humanly defining resource - language. And that instinct for language goes further, the desire to sculpt something memorable, lasting and tangible from their inner anguish.

Not all students arrive trembling or traumatised: most fall into the category of always having wanted to write, whilst, increasingly, a new breed of creative writing students keen to pick up credit points or gain access to one of the burgeoning MA courses in creative writing is evident. Many students are in full-time employment and the flexibility of distance learning offers them a chance to study within a structured framework. It's a broad community, the oldest member of which is 96 and the youngest 16. All have one thing in common - the willingness to enter into a creative relationship with a total stranger, their OCA writing tutor, through the postal or e-mail system.

To take up Paul Celan's metaphor of creative endeavour from another perspective, is signing up to tutor on a distance learning writing course also a cry for help - or at least an attempt to seek identity within the growing community of UK writer-teachers and their activities? OCA receives many more applications to tutor on courses than it can possibly employ. It currently has a team of 40 tutors and each one of those has around 5 applicants willing to take their place. The pay is neither outrageously high nor unfairly low, but at a recent tutor development meeting[113] all the tutors present confessed to some *ennui* with the business of teaching writing, of being constantly drained by students, but all also said that they'd be very reluctant to give up their OCA work even if they gave up the rest. Their reasons were that, at some invisible depth, distance learning tutoring fed the aquifers of their own writing. Dorothy Nimmo expresses this relationship in an article in the OCA writing journal Crossing The Border:

I found it extremely hard, when I started, to think of myself as a writer. But the workshops taught

[113] Residential tutor development course, held at the Arvon Foundation at Lumb Bank, March 1999

me that the only qualification I needed was to do it. The OCA course demonstrates this too. If a student sends in an assignment they have asserted their rights, their authority: they have said I am a writer. I have written. It takes a certain amount of courage and self-confidence just to do that. And when the tutor accepts the assignment they are confirming: You are a writer, I am your reader.

I have centred my life on the writing process. I have decided that it's the thing I do. And as long as I'm communicating in words I don't make much distinction between reacting to what goes on in my own head which will come out as poems, and what goes on in someone else's head from which they write poems I have to understand.

They both - the poems and the assignment work - begin in the same way. Here's this student's work, here's this vague idea at the back of my mind and I have to launch myself at whichever it is without knowing where I am going to land up. So I'm going to need (for both processes) a certain faith in my own creativity. Every time I pick up the latest OCA assignment and every time I start to unravel a new poem, I think, I'm not going to be able to do this, I'm not going to discern what this student means, or how they intend me to read this, or what will be helpful to say, or what needs saying that will lead them to something different. If it's my own work, I'm saying - I'm not going to be able to say this, I don't know what it is I want to say."[114]

Dorothy Nimmo is engagingly self-deprecating, but she establishes the continuum from her own first steps into writing to the way in which she guides the first steps of others. Despite the tone of tentative irony there is a clear commitment to the process, a clear understanding of the human need to communicate, a sense that as long as we're talking we're still alive.

The roots of this institutional idealism has its roots in the qualities of individual tutors, but also in the way the relationship between the courses, the students and their tutors was originally conceived - as a *community* of writers, which though not yet fully realised, is now becoming closer to the reality originally envisaged. Completion figures show that as students move onto the higher levels of study, the drop-out rate diminishes markedly. By this stage, students have begun to believe in themselves as writers and the relationship with their tutor has developed from tutor-to-student into a writer-to-writer exchange. After twelve years of arts education the first tutors to have been OCA students are now entering the College in the visual arts. The school of writing looks forward to joining that cycle, confirming the profound links that exist between the act of writing and the act of guiding the writing of others as an educational practitioner.

[114] Dorothy Nimmo, OCA tutor, from *My Life As A Writing Person*, Crossing The Border 2

So our message in a bottle is not thrown into a pattern of tidal currents, winds and uncertain natural hazards, but placed inside the more dependable culture of OCA; a response to it is guaranteed and the act of understanding and interpretation safeguarded. The isolation of the individual student is tempered by a sense of inclusiveness in a tribe that places value on both pedagogic process and artistic development, and where the student is an actor shaping the pattern of creation-and-response available to them. The student's engagement with OCA can be seen as a narrative, the disposition of educational components in its guidance systems are foci where metaphor, meaning and realisation are wired into the process, confirming context and conferring progression on the work. The reflexive nature of the process has created a self-assembling educational organism where each actor can be seen as both reader and writer. What kind of poem, we may ask, is this experience? What kind of story? What kind of epic narrative of navigation, discovery and self-knowledge? Furthermore, how can this narrative be extended and developed so that it engages its actors, its reader-writers, as fully and richly as possible?

These are questions which I can no longer answer in the OCA context, which may no longer be answerable on that context, but I believe that they remain key questions to the development of distance learning provision in creative writing.

OCA Course Development as Action Research

The whole programme of writing course development in OCA fits into a pattern which can be clearly identified as a model of 'participatory enquiry' or 'action research', though at the time of their development such theoretical models were not consciously invoked.

The writing courses were written on the hunch that there was a demand for them and structured around a model derived from my own experience of teaching writing in other contexts. Those courses were tested against individual students with human (personal development) and educational (writing development) needs, against other economic models within the college, and against the 'market' outside the college which our advertising sought to target. Their initial success led to refinement and progression. Student surveys were used to test student responses annually; a Course Committee was formed to discuss and test educational ideas and strategies in a more rigorous way at their formative stage; tutor monitoring[115] and development led to detailed feedback and a vigorous internal debate about key issues relating to tutorial response; the exigencies of accreditation led to the adoption of learning journals; and the whole reflective process which accompanied the creative work became progressively central to our conception of what was academically rigorous and creatively exciting.

The practice of responding to creative writing through correspondence had no precedent for the course authors or the tutors who were first initiated into OCA. A few tutors appointed subsequently had experience of academic distance learning, but only one in my ten-year involvement with OCA had taught a correspondence writing course - a commercial model which did not involve discursive writing on the OCA model. In this sense we became specialists in a field we had created ourselves. Donald Schön describes this process in a way which fits the OCA model quite closely:

As a practitioner experiences many variations of a small number of types of cases he is able to

[115] Original tutor monitoring reports remain confidential. The induction process saw tutor reports being examined by the Course Officer after the tutor had marked two assignments from at least 6 students, and thereafter they were looked at on a bi-annual basis. The written report supplied by the Course Officer looked at the reports from the viewpoint of presentation, tone and content.

'practice' his practice. He develops a repertoire of expectations, images and techniques. He learns what to look for and how to respond to what he finds. As long as his practice is stable, in the sense that it brings him the same type of cases, he becomes less and less subject to surprise. His knowing-in-practice tends to become increasingly tacit, spontaneous, and automatic, thereby conferring in him and his clients the benefits of specialisation.[116]

This sense of individual specialisation was reflected in the conduct of tutor development meetings. In the early days I felt, as Course Leader, that tutors needed to know much more about the wider implications of their practice - about the college, its administration, its wider curriculum and educational structure. After the first meeting there was a conscious and abrupt shift to the realisation that tutors were the experts on what they did and our model shifted to hands-on response sessions[117] and consultation which attempted to draw out tacit knowledge from individual tutors and pool it a resource. Another parallel is the monitoring of tutorial reports, which began as a form of quality control designed to offer tutors supportive feedback and to alert us to any problems with their responses, but which rapidly revealed itself as a rich archive of good practice which could be disseminated as inductive material to new tutors. The statutory elements of academic quality-control therefore became the agents of reflective practice.

This model of development created a special self-confidence in the creative writing school and we entered the process of assessment and accreditation with a mission to achieve this on our own terms - i.e. without sacrificing the 'openness'[118] of the process in any way. The relative independence of OCA aided this spirit of educational entrepreneurism, a sense that we could analyse a problem, produce a solution and test it without very much insulation between us and the students who had paid for their course and expected satisfaction, stimulation and high standards of tuition.

In 1997, I took over the OCA distance learning photography courses in a period of economic recession, and began to re-build them on the creative writing model with the approval of OCA Director, Dr. David Davies. The entire arts curriculum of OCA had grown up in a diverse, even *ad hoc* way, and it was felt that the writing courses were both well-structured and successful,

[116] Schön, 1983, p60
[117] Marking and discussing our responses to student work at development meetings
[118] That is, without erecting admissions barriers or pushing students into early decisions about assessment - access remained open, students could choose not to be formally assessed or they could opt for assessment at any stage in the course

exhibiting all the educational and administrative components to which the College as a whole could aspire. Accordingly, I overhauled the photography tutor-base, widened it through the appointment of new tutors (including the first women tutors), introduced tutorial monitoring, appointed an assessment officer to supervise assessment and began to rationalise the course materials, including introducing an *Advanced* course built on the creative writing model.

When I handed those courses over to the newly appointed photography Course Leader[119] in 1989, they resembled the writing courses in most important respects. Good educational practice in a college like OCA equates to good business practise and sustainability, and in the past two years there has been a steady, if unspectacular, increase in photography students at all levels of study; retention levels are improved and communication enhanced between tutors and the college. Tutor monitoring has revealed evidence of a high standard of tutorial response and this has led to a new sense of mission and self-confidence. The appointment of an external examiner and the adoption of the 'triangulated' system of assessment[120] has maintained visibly high standards of academic attainment which relate closely to those of creative writing, and this now includes the introduction of learning journals at *Advanced* level and reflective accounts to accompany assessment folios.

In April 1999 when the new Director[121] of OCA took over management of the organisation, I was appointed Director of Studies and charged with the task of reorganising the entire college along the lines of the writing courses, so potent had that model of curriculum development and management proved to be. A model, nonetheless, derived from consensus and consultation, which put tutors at the heart of the process, and which recognised their contribution as artists *and* educators. By this time my own perceptions of the process had begun to centre around a more formal notion of development as 'action research', validating a process which had initially been an intuitive response to the opportunity to create something new. Accordingly, my approach to the Arts Council of England for funding in 1999[122] was able to invoke the action-research model as a means of promoting a coherent sense of the re-

[119] Derrick Preston, who had formerly worked as a tutor and then as a course adviser
[120] The use of three examiners to mark work and determine grades
[121] Roger Head, replacing Dr. David Davies
[122] The first attempt to attract core-funding from this source for OCA activity across all subject areas, though the literature department had funded the writing and reading courses at an early stage in their development

structuring process which was then at the planning stage.

I had discovered a theoretical model to match my empirical research and experience and could project a coherent sense of strategic change by relating what we had achieved to a recognised methodology. By this time my involvement in writing research papers as part of this PhD research had also begun to sharpen my perceptions of the more theoretical aspects of what we had achieved through collective good-practise. But action within OCA had not formed the only research. My own creative writing and teaching in associated areas - like that of all OCA writing tutors - was continually feeding ideas back into the distance learning work. An account of some of that work appears below and again, my model for progression is that of action research - the testing of practical strategies against an audience and against the theoretical framework or rationale that I found necessary to unfurl around around each new project.

The idea of reflexivity as an organisational developmental strategy and the practice of it in the educational process converge in an interesting way in OCA. The involvement of each tutor with each student is itself a reflexive process where both parties engage closely in a circularity of creation and response. Our organisational and developmental strategies were derived from or modified by those fundamental relationships and it is possible to take an holistic view of this which links closely with the notion that an organisation employing reflexive processes can resemble a 'semiotic web', where creative energy is expressed and meaning experienced through practice at a number of related levels. What began as an individualistic, positivistic enterprise - Graham Mort writing a suite of distance learning writing courses and building tutorial support to teach them - becomes diffused and re-assembled into a much more subtle form of educational enterprise. Peter Reason argues that participatory human inquiry is fundamentally inclusive, a healing process for the split in the modern human psyche and in contemporary epistemology:

To heal means to make whole : we can only understand our world as a whole if we are part of it; as soon as we attempt to stand outside, we divide and separate. In contrast, making whole necessarily implies participation: one characteristic of a participative world-view is that the individual person is restored to the circle of community and the human community to the context of the wider natural world. To make whole also means to make holy: another characteristic of a participatory world-view is that meaning and mystery are restored to human

experience, to the world is once again experienced as a sacred place.[123]

This sense of restoration is very much aligned with the writing process where the individual's urge to write may be driven by a need to re-define themselves within the human community. The need to reach out towards something that seems to lie just out of reach, to find out who we really are, was expressed to me by students and prospective students many times over my ten year tenure with OCA.

By engaging with the creative writing process, exploring the world through a new 'writerly vision' and through the precisions of language itself, experience is both brought under control and expanded into new possibilities. The writing process itself is participatory - students working closely with a tutor - and the evidence of that participation becomes available at the level of course management and development. The possibility for participatory organisational enquiry based on the existing tutor-student paradigm then occurs. The comments of the Course Officer on the tutor's reports to their students form a new loop of reflexivity which is then fed back into the student-tutor loop. There is a resultant sense of inclusion into the OCA community of *writer-educators* and then a further sense of identity becomes possible, that of *artist-educator* within the broader framework of the five schools of OCA as practice begins to converge. This energising of tutor awareness makes its way directly back to the student through the educational process.

The establishment of such a 'semiotic web', where knowledge developed from experience can be accessed at a number of levels, can only be brought about through high-energy, labour-intensive communications, through the *effort* of communication at strategic levels: between Directors and Course Leaders, tutors and students, office staff with the enquiring public. In the economic context of OCA, which receives no core funding to nourish its basic existence, the pressure simply to sell units of study and disengage from educational idealism becomes very strong. It seems ironic that the participative knowledge developed through the very independence of the college (from nationally enforced curricula and educational policy) may now be threatened by the economic isolation and vulnerability that independence entails.

It therefore seemed imperative to view the organisation and the processes of

[123] Reason, 1994, p10

its development through the reflective medium of my PhD research so that knowledge is not lost but shared and developed into a rhetorical framework which allows it to persist in new forms and adaptations.

Organical Perceptions

So far this overview has drawn on the experience of OCA tutors and students, but my engagement with the college in the past ten years has also affected my own writing and, especially, my thinking about writing. The more I have worked as a writer and educator, the more I have felt the need to work within a personal ideological framework, a philosophy of writing, against which new ideas could be tested - both my own and those of others. As a writer I have been drawn more to exposition through story, metaphor and parable, rather than through linguistic or critical theory, though I also recognise that ideas can feed a practical process in surprising ways, just as practice can spring a new idea into the process.

This PhD overview is a summation of the ideas and processes that I have developed through my own work - both pedagogic and creative. Those pragmatically developed ideas are linked to the observations of other writers - scientists, theorists, linguists, students and tutors. Summation implies compression and compression suggests energy. This overview attempts to establish and link up ideas, to see them as energy with implied movement or direction. Just as the word-chain in a poem or sentence has syntax upon which overall understanding depends, then ideas which describe a creative process also have a syntax on which our ability to apprehend and subsequently develop that process also depends. For me the process of assembling those ideas has been one in which I discovered a greater unification, a sense of what I knew, had learned, or discovered, gaining strength and coherence from the process of reflection.

Every writer develops their own belief system around the writing process, their own system of 'poetics'. As Robert Sheppard observes:

> Poetics are the products of the process of reflection upon writings, and upon the act of writing, gathering from the past and from others, speculatively casting into the future.[124]

For me, a system of 'poetics' is also essential to the enterprise of education and, in this respect, teaching and writing as a creative practitioner forms a uniquely rich and unified enterprise.

[124] Sheppard, 1999, p99

My own 'poetics' in both areas have developed simultaneously around the key question that all art, indeed all human enquiry, seem to posit: *What is it like to be alive and human?* The formulation is simple, but the response is complex beyond formulation.

Philosophers, artists and scientists attempt to answer the question in their own way; Newtonian notions of absolute scientific authority and dependability have given way to more flexible theories that link with the humanistic processes of art. Modern science acknowledges that the more we observe a process the more that process may appear to be influenced by our act of enquiry; investigations of the physical universe have to engage with the observer as well as the observed.

Defining this 'anthropic principle' the physicist, Stephen Hawking, says:

We see the universe the way it is because if it were different we would not be here to observe it.[125]

Hawking's work in physics envisages the physical world as a problem with two ends. At the micro end of existence lies quantum mechanics and the uncertainty principle, at the macro end, cosmology and the curvature of space-time. His quest is for a unification of physics, a single theory of existence which can account for all phenomena. This process accords with the writer's attempt to achieve understanding, using language itself to explore the nature of experience and our responses to it.

Before the discovery of atoms, molecules, positrons, electrons, neutrons and quarks, the poet and illustrator William Blake believed that the physical world was infinite for rather different reasons than the discovery of infinitely smaller particles of matter or the curvature of space-time. Writing *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* in 1793, he has a vision of the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel, who dine with him. Blake asks the prophets how they could be certain that God spoke to them and whether they had ever suffered misunderstanding. Isaiah answers:

I saw no God, nor heard any, in a finite organical perception; but my senses discover'd the

[125] Hawking, 1988, p223

infinite in everything, and as I was then persuaded, & remain confirm'd, that the voice of honest indignation is the voice of God, I cared not for the consequences, but wrote.

Blake asks.' Does a firm perswasion that a thing is so. make it so?' and Isaiah replies:

All poets believe that it does, & in ages of imagination this firm perswasion removed mountains; but many are not capable of a firm perswasion of any thing.[126]

This seems a curiously paradoxical mixture of the nebulous and the positivistic. On the one hand it is necessary to hold firm belief and conviction, but those positive convictions in the transformative power of imagination are, after-all, beliefs in applied uncertainty or illusion. But Blake accurately grasps the nature of imagination in its feeding from, and stimulation of, the physical senses.

One primary difference between being alive as a sub-atomic particle, amoeba, pilot fish or human being is that the human being has reflective consciousness and can communicate its sense of life in a remarkably sophisticated way. The OCA writing courses try to convey this through an invocation of the 'organical perceptions', simply because a writer's abstract need to discuss the meaning of life may not be a need with which a reader feels much connection. So the writing must have the texture of physical existence and the OCA coursebooks deliberately emphasise this appeal to the reader's physical senses, just as my own poems and stories do.

For reasons that have their roots in biological survival systems, human beings are not at perceptual liberty to ignore information, though we are at liberty to position it within a hierarchy of need. The writer's job, then, is to place what they are saying as near to the top of that hierarchy as possible. An appeal to the physical senses is the most imperative way in which to do this. Of course, this is a conveniently simple model of experience. As human beings we do not simply have physical experiences which can then be communicated in purely physical form; the experience itself is refracted through language even as it is happening. The communication that results is not pure conveyance, but a response through the opacity of a language of signs, symbols, images and metaphors. As M.A.K. Halliday observes:

[126] Blake, 1793, (Penguin edition 1958), P99

A child learning language is at the same time learning other things through language - building up a picture of the reality that is around him and inside him. In this process, which is also a social process, the construal of reality is inseparable from the construal of the semantic system in which reality is encoded. In this sense, language is a shared meaning potential, at once both a part of experience and an intersubjective interpretation of experience. [127]

Language *is* experience and when we talk about experience we convey not only the facts of an external reality in language code, but its internal reality - our perceptions of it - and that with all the subjective social, cultural and political overtones of the transmission and reception process. Communication itself is coloured by a our self-consciousness about communication - a sense of audience or readership in the case of the writer. Education is a progressive into this very maze of questions from which learning - a shift or development in consciousness - may result.

So one main tenet of my poetics of writing is that poetry and fiction are not abstractions - linguistic equations to be worked out through critical analysis - but linguistic 'experiences' with more or less approximation to the complexity of living experience. To return to Wolfgang Iser's statement in full:

As text and reader thus merge into a single situation, the division between subject and object no longer applies, and it therefore follows that meaning is no longer an object to be defined but an effect to be experienced.[128]

That does not rule out critical analysis or any other formal method of understanding or reading the work, but it argues for the restoration of the work into a humanistic principle of reader/writer engagement. What interests me is the convergence of reality and imagination in each new educational project, in each new poem or story, and in each moment of life.

Education is also an irreducible experience rather than a balance sheet of cause and effect - though I would always argue that an educator should have a clear rationale for their strategies. Their rationale will rarely be a description of what actually happens, but the projected approximation of what *might* is itself a measure of the surprise that often follows. My creative writing workshops seek to create an 'event' about which to write and from which to

[127] Halliday, 1978, p1
[128] Freund, 1987, p143

project a development strategy for the writing. That event is often rich in metaphorical possibility as well as sensory experience: the introduction of a significant artifact; speculation as to the contents of a locked bag; the blindfold handling of a set of interlocking shell boxes in which you are invited to awake; the making of a journey; engagement with a landscape, word, memory, sculpture, poem, photographic image; the experience of taking another human being's hand in yours; being offered a dead man's camera with his last film inside.

Blake's model of 'organical perception' is a useful one because it reflects something about human language itself, its peculiar persuasiveness, disorderliness, distractions and shifts of attention. If we were to rank our awareness of sense in order of importance, sight would be followed by hearing, by touch, by taste and by smell. The structure and reach of our language reflects this ranking. We have a huge vocabulary dedicated to sight because we are primarily visual animals. Hearing also has a sophisticated range of language. But language fades from the positive sense of touch towards the vagueness of smell and taste, which despite their pervasiveness in human experience simply do not enjoy the same degree of linguistic separation.

If wolves had our language then they would have a vast vocabulary for the sense of smell. Bees might be expected to have a large vocabulary for taste and moles for touch. An enormous proportion of our human brain's power is linked to visual awareness, yet our eyes are unremarkable and many human beings suffer from congenital or age-related sight defects. It is the brain that 'sees':

> Every aspect of everything we see has to be constructed inside our heads: movement, shape, colour, size, what everything is and where it is. Nothing in the world is simply there - it has to be pieced together by the brain.[129]

The brain is dedicated to *discrimination* and *interpretation* and the computational instruments for those acts are found in many separate centres of the brain and its cerebral cortex. We must also include the role of language and memory in the brain's ability to piece together a coherent and describable world from a mass of sensory input which is dominated by vision.

[129] Professor Susan Greeenfield, The Mind's Eye, BBC2, 1.8.00

It is interesting to reflect that language has tackled the 'ineffable' presence of God for centuries and now attempts to tackle unobservable sub-atomic particles in a way that not only the scientific priesthood, but the layman can grasp. But if the universe is what is describable, as Stephen Hawking implies:

> Humanity's deepest desire for knowledge is justification enough for our continuing quest. And our goal is nothing less than a complete description of the universe we live in.[130]

then the universe is also what is imaginable, as William Blake infers. It would be easy to get lost in the ramifications of a philosophy of human perception but my focus here is on the practising writer and how they bring about engagement with their reader. In simple terms, we appeal directly to the reader's senses and that appeal has a visceral, urgent quality which is hard, indeed impossible, to ignore. One reviewer describes this effect in my own work:

> Here, we have the familiar effort at putting us sensually with him in his searching stance...taking us into the feel and taste of a place with every advancing line of his fragments of response.[131]

This effort at putting the reader 'with' the writer is significant; we can evoke or enact actual experience through language and engage the reader, but we can also describe synthetic or invented experience and make them believe in it equally. Student writers are encouraged to practise their writing on the observable world in order to be able to synthesise new, imaginative worlds in a way that engages the reader in their actuality.

Of course, all remembered experience is synthesised, but there is still a distinction between experience that could happen (a black cat rubbing its fur against an open window) and experience that could not (a black cat juggling with balls of fire). Human beings are infinitely open to the seductions of language and, providing enough sensory detail is made available (and not too much) they will readily imagine either scenario. We might add that the second instance, the cat juggling with fire, has an even stronger appeal just because is is so fantastical, stimulating our culturally developed sense of the surreal - a form of art which allows us to re-arrange the components of reality into dream-like sequences of unreality.

[130] Hawking, 1988, p16

[131] Mort, 1992, *Snow From The North*, cover notes

In order to approximate to the true sense of being humanly aware, we need to add to the five physical senses the sixth sense of *consciousness*; not only are we alive, but we know it. It is impossible to be fully alive, for the most part, without knowing it. In fact, as human beings we would say that there's no point in being alive unless we know we are. Our joy in being alive is an act of consciousness, as is our terror and grief at being alive. Part of that wider consciousness is what we call, in broad terms, the human imagination. Human imagination seems to me to work at the same fundamental level as language in relation to experience. Furthermore, what might have remained as ungoverned electrical discharges across the synapses, flickering images of experience replayed in our minds, can become ordered into art through language.

Our relationship with the organically perceived, in the direct sense, is limited to the present moment, or to a string of moments which are moving through space and time as a constant stream of perceptions. But the reality of human existence is not limited to those moments. Our capacity to daydream, to experience mental activity which may have no connection with our current physical activity is a striking example of this. A man making love to his partner thinks of a Pacific Island he has never visited, a child reprimanded by her teacher for untidy written work remembers a day fishing for freshwater salmon with her father five years before, a woman entering a brain scanner cuts back the rose bushes in her garden on an autumn morning that has not yet happened, for it is still spring.

We might infer from these mental processes that human imagination is an extraordinary adjunct to our lives, an interesting and remarkable phenomenon that somehow allows us to drive a car perfectly safely whilst thinking of other things. But the function of imagination is more fundamental than this. Without memory we could hardly live the lives we live; imagination offers the certitude that the world still exists even though we can't see it. (In answer to this existentialist dilemma it has been argued that God sees it all, so we needn't worry too much!). In this way we can endure academic meetings, train journeys, dentistry and interminable religious services whilst keeping in touch with that other world. Day-dreaming is a necessity that allows us to remain static, to override organic perceptual information. And it allows us to do so

quite strategically, so that we don't crash the car, stop making love, mention irrelevant fishing trips to our angry teacher or run away from hospitals mid-way through a surgical procedure.

Within a linguistic work of art these shifts in time perspective can be described - as Wolfgang Iser described them - as a dialogue between *anticipation* and *retrospection*:

We have seen that, during the process of reading, there is an active interweaving of anticipation and retrospection, which on a second reading turns into a kind of advanced retrospection. The impressions that arise as a result of this process will vary from individual to individual but only within the limits imposed by the written as opposed to the unwritten text. In the same way, two people gazing at the night sky may both be looking at the same collection of stars, but one will see the image of a plough, and the other will make out a dipper. The 'stars' in a literary text are are fixed; the lines that join them are variable. The author of the text, may, of course, exert plenty of influence on the reader's imagination - he has the whole panoply of narrative text at his disposal - but no author worth his salt will ever attempt to set the *whole* picture before his reader's eyes.[132]

As Iser himself suggests, the imaginative fulcrum that words act upon and the verbal levers that shift consciousness this way or that find a correlation in moments of time in actual experience. In other words, the deployment of 'anticipation and retrospection' in a text is not a peculiarity of verbal texture, but an approximation of 'real' experience:

In whatever way, and under whatever circumstances, the reader may link the different phases of the text together, it will always be the process of anticipation and retrospection that leads to the formation of the virtual dimension, which in turn transforms the text into an experience for the reader. The way in which this experience comes about through a process of continual modification is closely akin to the way in which we gather experience in life. And thus the 'reality' of the reading experience can illuminate basic patterns of real experience.[133]

Iser is prescient in anticipating a notion which has been arrived at through recent studies of brain function and visual perception. Professor Susan Greeenfield asserts that images are formed in the mind and supported, rather than entirely formed, by incoming visual information:

But the imagination isn't just active occasionally - recent research suggests that our brains are constantly distorting what we see. Using imagination our brains take a bold short cut: we guess

[132]Lodge, 1988, p 195 quoting Iser,1972
[133]Lodge, 1988, p194, quoting Iser, 1972

what's out there from past experience rather than having to build up the image in our heads each time from scratch - the brain doesn't allow us to see what's out there, it actually invents much of it."[134]

We can understand most of the world, most of the universe, as imaginary since we could not possibly experience it directly. Even if we could, that experience would not be continuous across a wide arena because it would have to be constantly verified - just as animals mark and verify their environment through bodily secretions. Constant physical activity would replace mental activity and our world would become circumscribed once more, rather like that mythical painting and re-painting of the Forth Bridge. An analogy of imagination can be made with the largest sense organ in the body - the skin - which regulates temperature and maintains contact with our physical environment in a pervasive way; in a similar way the imaginative part of consciousness, maintains our awareness of the world we cannot see or directly experience.

Extending that position in the light of Susan Greenfield's comment, it seem that our sense of the present moment may actually depend on the reservoirs of memory and imagination that we have accumulated. Professor Rudolfo Llinas of New York University, speaking in the same context of a visually constructed world, takes that position even further:

Dreaming and being awake are the next of kin, if not exactly the same thing. Basically the brain is a dreaming machine, it is the brain that generates reality, it secretes reality, so to speak and that reality is modulated, is limited by the senses.[135]

It is a fascinating *volte face*, to imagine that the brain works in reverse to our normal sense of it, imagining infinite scenarios and using the physical senses to limit them into the manageable versions that we share and characterise as reality.

So our experience of being alive is infinitely complex in its habitation and evocation of space and time; we not only live in present space and time, but in times and spaces that have passed or that have not yet happened, a phenomena that T.S.Eliot expressed through poetry:

[134] Professor Susan Greeenfield, The Mind's Eye, BBC2, 1.8.00
[135] Professor Rudolfo Llinas, New York University, The Mind's Eye, BBC2, 1.8.00

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.[136]

All time, then, is available to us and, for the writer, that creates conditions of special imaginative fecundity. Photography can be understood as an art form of anticipation and retrospection; still images which represent only one sixtieth of a second teeter on the brink of possible histories and futures:

Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation and fantasy.[137]

If we imagine the flow of time both moving in an anticipatory way and recalled into moments of retrospection, then we have clue to the imaginative energy that is released. When we imaginatively re-visit a place or time in the past we also revisit its emotional charge as well, so that our sense of being somewhere is accompanied by our sense of being someone in the past *and* someone here and now, looking both forwards and back; what Iser calls 'advance retrospection'[138] in re-reading a text is an aspect of the complex information-processing functions through which human beings are alive and responsive to their experience.

So our imaginative experience of the world obtains considerable temporal complexity, allowing us to exist in the past, future and present simultaneously. Only in sleep do we surrender our grasp of the actual present moment, yet the imagination remains powerfully active in the promotion of dreams, substituting an often overwhelming sense of presence.

Human language, which must have developed through the gestural syntax of dance, the visuals of painterly representation and the sounds of oral mimicry, invokes and recreates each of those experiences with great accuracy. Taste

[136] Eliot, 1944, p13
[137] Sontag, 1977, p23
[138] Lodge, 1988, p195, quoting Iser,1972

and smell, which cannot have formed the building blocks of language in the same way, are deficient in vocabulary as we noted earlier. Ants whose language is partly chemical, sharks which emit electromagnetic forces, or eels which possess pressure sensing organs, live in literally different worlds from us and from each other. Worlds in which organical perceptions beyond our human frequency range become part of their communications system.

Writing, derived directly from our capacity to *speak* and *think* language (which itself is a kind of experience), is capable to a greater or lesser extent of evoking the whole of human experience: physical, intellectual, emotional, linguistic, spiritual. The known, felt and imagined spheres of existence. The two main forms of writing are discursive (my attempt to analyse my feelings about language at this moment), and creative (my attempt as a writer to actually re-create experience and put my readers inside it). Nor are they mutually exclusive. Where scientific language runs out of steam it uses the language of poetry - 'Black Holes' and 'White Dwarves' - to describe reality, metaphors rather than analytical descriptions. Similarly creative-writers may employ discursive writing in all sorts of ways in poems, novels and stories. So we can see these forms of writing as polarities in a continuum where expediency or aesthetics is able to exert choice.

The use of figurative language by scientists is a significant point of contact with the lay community and attempts a universality of understanding of concepts which, if broken down into constituent scientific processes, would baffle most of us. Metaphors form a short-hand, by-passing detail in order to grasp an idea or experience as a whole.

The use of such figurative speech suggests another another loop of *Experience - Language - Reflection* to be established. Language allows us to engage in abstract thought (thought freed from immediate action), but abstraction in the widest sense may be built from aspects of concrete experience. In order to describe an object we can compare it to another object. Let us consider the small porcelain door knob that I carry in my creative writing kit. It has a brass rim and in figurative terms:

Looks like a small light-bulb
Feels as cool as marble
Spins with a sound like hissing gas

Smells like a pocketful of change
Tastes as bitter as sloes

So much for an 'organical perception' of the object, all perfectly concrete in an imagined way. But what happens if we talk about the concrete in terms of the abstract?

As quiet as a day gone by
Silent as as a forgotten prayer
Blank as a turned page
Warm as an empty bed
Cold as absence

Now we are describing the object in a perfectly understandable yet remarkable way: we are comparing it to things which, by definition, do not exist or which have been diminished in some way. So language moves us beyond the physicality of the world towards the world of imaginative figuration, no less powerful, no less irreducible. Furthermore we can add a cultural charge to the conceit, so that we invoke the experience of, say, religious or philosophical belief:

It is white as the wings as a dove
As clear as the angel Gabriel's eyes
As pure as the blood of Christ
As calm as the Buddha
Fallen like Lucifer from grace

Now our physical sense of the object is taken into a new realm, where a particular emotional atmosphere or charge is attached to the object. Language not only describes the world in this way, is transforms and translates it into a new kind of linguistic and imaginative experience. As Roger Fowler observes, 'Metaphor is in fact, so central to language that it is not only the most important of literary devices but also the most elusive and protean.'[139]

Like a physicist searching for the smallest particles of physical matter or trying to grasp the nature of physical forces, the writer and the teacher of writing are led inexorably towards the nature of linguistic matter, to the individual word, the morpheme, the smallest particle of meaningful sound. Saussure posited

[139] Fowler, 1973, p 112

the notion that words are arbitrary signifiers - 'Speech sounds are only the instrument of thought, and have no independent existence.'[140] - placed in the matrix of a grammatical and syntactical system. Notions of the cultural and historical correctness of language-use have given way to a sense of language as a fast-moving, mutable medium that nevertheless conforms to a kind of informal contractual agreement between social groups who use it. The language of Hispanic immigrants to Florida, the creole English of Jamaica, the street slang of New York all conform to predictable patterns of grammar. Grammar, rather than existing as an external convention of language, is a convention of our internalised, inherited and uniquely human capacity to deploy semiotic systems.

But the signifiers themselves are not arbitrary beyond their existence as phonemes. If we were to take an earlier phrase - *It tastes as bitter as sloes* - then each significant word (each noun, adjective or verb in this case) which conveys or implies a concrete sense impression, is resonant with meanings. At any moment of their deployment in writing or speech those meanings are both cultural (i.e. generally agreed) and individual (bitter for you might mean beer, and the pleasure of beer; for me it implies remorse). Both cultural and individual significances are complex and, often, contradictory. Saussure's observations endorse this and add a further element:

> Language has an individual and a social aspect. One is not conceivable without the other. Furthermore: language at any given time involves an established system and an evolution. At any given time it is an institution in the present and a product of the past.[141]

Not only is language a social and personal commodity it has an inbuilt evolutionary tendency which modifies it for each new generation of users. So when we read a text written in the past we read a language spoken in the past.

If we brainstorm a simple noun like the word 'green' with a group of students, we find that it carries both a positive and negative charge. On the positive side it stands for the Earth, oceans, emeralds, the biosphere, spring, fruit, nature and the life-force, and on the negative side for for slime, snot, reptiles, envy, bad luck and putrefaction. The word 'red' represents anger, war, hatred, a blood-wound, hell, the devil and lust, balanced against passion, sexuality, the

[140] Lodge, 1988, p 3 quoting Saussure,1915
[141] Lodge, 1988, p3, quoting Saussure, 1915

life-force, energy, fire and love. These words stand for a physical thing - a colour - which is also a highly charged psychic symbol. For the writer no word and no physical thing is without significance; what makes a writer different from the non-writer (if I introduce a tenuous distinction) is the way they *see* and *experience* the world, the degree to which *actual* 'anticipation and retrospection' are filtered through their *linguistic* counterpart. This manner of perception is an educated one, and therefore one which also can be taught.

This dynamically charged tension is present in many words, as in many things: the word 'cord' stands equally for umbilicus and hangman's noose, 'priest' for christenings and funerals, 'earth' for the grave and the planet. Even abstract words like 'celibate', 'purity, 'honest' suggest the corollaries of 'lustful', 'corruption', 'dishonest'. For every particle of matter there exists a particle of anti-matter and when they meet they annihilate. Not so for language which can accommodate the most extraordinary tension of significances within a word and still deploy that word in speech, in a written sentence, or in a line of poetry.

Not all meanings can be said to carry a positive or negative charge in every situation, so we might understand a word as an atom composed of positive, negative and neutral particles held together in tension. Another analogy might be that words are like musical chords composed of intervals which develop increasingly complex resonances; the more complex, the richer and more harmonically ambivalent. Or words are like chromosomes, inherited directly from our parents and the gene-pool of our culture; the genetic information they carry forms the potential meanings of the word and the potential to fuse with other words into new configurations of meaning. But because words are both a cultural (commonly accepted) commodity and a deeply personal commodity, their behaviour is both predictable and unpredictable. We know what the words 'green cord' 'black priest' and 'white skin' are meant to convey in purely visual terms, but what kind of emotional charge do they carry for each reader beyond that visual recognition?

The writer must anticipate how such emotional and psychological reactions may be triggered. We place words into strings of syntax, we observe or break the rules of grammar, and the context of the word allows us some control. But not complete control since we cannot anticipate or be aware of all the

subliminal meaning of every word for every reader - or even for one reader. In this respect, language can be said to be similar to the laws of physics. At the Newtonian level of observable phenomena language *works*: we speak, give instructions, receive them, act upon information received. But at the sub-atomic, subliminal level of 'quantum language', the uncertainty principle prevails as we transmit and receive at a more instinctive or unpredictable level. This tendency towards unpredictability is also enforced by the evolutionary tendency of writing to shift its meanings.

My point is that words not only describe things, they *are* things. By this I mean that it is more useful for me to understand them as charged particles, universes of galactic verbal material, chromosomes, systems of meaning orbiting a sound or written symbol, chain-reactions or musical chords than merely to understand them as arbitrary signifiers. If words produce psychological reaction, like a pebble thrown into a pond, then the word itself has a kind of mass and energy: psychic mass and energy able to displace and disturb our psychologically based perceptions of reality.

Physicists use imaginary figures to calculate imaginary time, because the multiplication of 'real' minus figures is always positive (-2 x -2 = +4) and that cannot describe hypothetical scenarios of universal time-travel, worm-holes and time-warps, where we may arrive at our destination before we have set off. If words have psychological mass, then silences, the space between words (the 'unwritten text' Iser refers to earlier), carry the implication of a word, and also have mass (presence/effect) because of their very absence. That absence has to be inhabited by the human mind's anticipation, and impacts just as the mass of a word impacts as it discharges its energy. So we could say that words have mass and that silences operate like imaginary words; they are part of the the 'gaps, blanks and indeterminacies'[142] which we bridge and imbue with meaning.

If a word *possesses* mass and energy, and silences *imply* mass and energy, then it follows that we can think of a story as an infinitely complex structure, an architecture of vibrating or oscillating linguistic matter transmitting from the consciousness of the writer into the consciousness of the reader. A structure, in which meaning may be both *encountered* in the form of discourse and *experienced* in the form of figuration and narrative.

[142] Freund, 1987, p141

Tides

In the classical narrative model, a story ought to have a beginning a middle and an end. Or it may, more potently, have a beginning, a middle and a beginning - that is, an ending which finishes the story on the page, but that allows it to echo or resonate or inhabit the reader's mind. The notion of conclusion is therefore innately uncomfortable in a treatise on creative writing, but perhaps it is possible to see a sense of pattern and movement in the work so far and to predict where tides might take our message.

Many of the threads of the discourse I have laid out above have been incorporated into the OCA course materials and into my tutorial responses to students' work[143]. Many have been explored empirically in face-to-face workshops, where students of all ages have contributed an immeasurable amount to my sense of language and writing and life. Interaction with students in all contexts from distance learning to residential face-to-face courses has formed a kind of 'action research', a programme in which ideas have been tested again and again. Processes which became predictable and dependable enable me to move beyond them towards new methods by using them as building blocks in the searching out of response from students *about* language and *through* language.

There is a parallel in the process of writing too, in that we find a voice, a model of the poem or story which 'works' - that is, it succeeds in getting published and critics respond positively. In both areas there is a danger in repeating a model of success, of always running the workshop or writing the poem or telling the story that we have made our own. There is a sense, then, in which the 'distance' that Celan identifies as the one across which we launch our work, is not the *problem* of communication which I have identified earlier, but a measure of the energy with which each new work should be charged. With the advent of each new creative piece, each new tutorial relationship, each educational project, settles a new distance with a new energy quotient implied to overcome it.

In my stories and poems I move through this process in a different way and

[143] See Appendix 4, p114, for sample reports

with far less self-consciousness and control. Perhaps that is because I write in the only way a writer can, groping towards the final shape of the story or poem, governed by more uncertainty than certainty. And perhaps that is the way it should be if the creative work is to hold any freshness or surprise. In the introduction to my poem sequence *Into The Ashes*[144] , I wrote:

> Poetry has this crucial quality of uniting thought and feeling and these poems were written to act like a high-tension coil, forcing a current across the gap in our consciousness to produce a spark of recognition.

I see now how much that underlying sense of distance, even if it is the millimetre in a spark plug, has underpinned my notion of how the educational process and my own writing need to create a sense of urgency in the recipient, an almost visceral directness of stimulus and response. Just as rhythm in language depends on the spaces between words, so understanding depends on the interstices between ideas and experiences and the way we bridge them.

Much of my work has been spent in the de-mystification of the writing process because of the educator's democratic instinct to share what I know, or have learned, or think I am beginning to understand. My creative writing has another purpose - to share what I do not yet know, but am starting to feel or may one day come to realise. Again that rhythm of 'anticipation and retrospection' identified by Iser. Writing has been described as 'Like trying to remember something that has not yet happened.[145] I am not sure that working as a creative writing tutor and course writer has made me a better writer, but it's certainly made me a better facilitator of other people's writing and it's changed my writing in ways I *believe* are for the better - bearing in mind that it would have changed anyway.

The more I developed my pragmatic ideas about language exchange and literary structure, the more I came to see a poem or story as a complex three-dimensional effect which caused a kind of psychological displacement. This led to further investigations with performance groups to try to understand how a poem could move the air in a room, inhabiting actual as well as

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[144]Mort, 1988, Forward

[145] Novelist Suzannah Dunn, quoting Anita Brookner, Arvon Foundation writing course, 1989

psychological space through choral performance - often by placing the audience in the centre and moving a dynamic soundscape around them. Many of these ideas were piloted on educational projects such as the Open Your Heart health-awareness community project in Gateshead[146] where I worked with a group of schoolchildren to create a pantoum[147] which mimicked the operation of the chambers of the heart and which was then performed as a 4-way circulatory performance poem.

Experiments with performance have led directly to the development of new work for radio. My first hearing on CD of Glenn Gould's radio documentary, *The Idea Of North*[148] from his *Solitude Trilogy* confirmed many of my ideas about the multiplicity of vocal layers that a listener could tolerate; radio also offered a level of technical control difficult to achieve with live performers. Initially, I adapted existing poems for radio - *Flymowing*[149] and *The Red Field*[150], going on to create a radio drama from a scientific prose work: *The Life of the Bee* by Maurice Maeterlinck[151] I'm now working on a new radio drama, *Cuba Libre at the Café España*, in which I will include poems and incorporate vocal sub-text as well as sound-effects, music and spoken dialogue.

Other projects, which derived from and developed the core ideas outlined above, have led to text being installed in three dimensional matrices - notably the Preston Peace Garden[152] (where I worked with a group of Asian women to create a poem written simultaneously in Urdu, Gujarati and English), the Brockhole National Park centre (where my work with sculptor Graciela Ainsworth[153] created a series on 'interactive' installations where text could only be rescued by a reader becoming involved with the matrix), and, again, the Gateshead Open Your Heart project (where I devised a 'poetry machine' in the form of a 2 metre tall 'totem pole' with rotating text that could create new juxtapositions and combinations from fixed elements).

Essentially, all these ideas of installation, whether in sounds or in a physical matrix have introduced a space or distance or indeterminacy between the

[146] With Celebratory Arts in Primary Healthcare, at Thomas Hepburn School, Felling, Gateshead, Year 9 pupils.October 1992
[147] See Appendix 5, p139
[148] Canadian Broadcasting Corporation - FM, December 28th, 1967
[149] BBC Radio 3, *Between The Ears*, November 7th, 1996
[150] BBC Radio 4, *Stanza*, March 26th 1997
[151] BBC Radio 4, Friday Play, November 26th, 1999
[152] September 1996
[153] October, 1998

material and the audience so that they have to *act* in order to apprehend the piece or to change it.

In a recent project based on Andy Goldsworthy's millennium Sheepfolds[154] project in Cumbria, I worked with primary school children to produce a personal response to his work and to the landscape in which it is established - in this case, 16 sheepfolds, each with a field boulder placed inside, spaced alternately along an old drove road at Casterton, South Cumbria. That personal response was formulated in notebooks through the process of spontaneous writing. These energetic, richly detailed, impulsive notes were then refined into short poems in a writing workshop. Parallels were established between the way wallers built the folds from random stone, and the way the notebooks offered a resource which needed to be selected and ordered. Words, like, stones, had facets of meaning which could only be juxtaposed to certain other words, but which overall offered a wide variety of possible decisions in relation to poetic form. Throughout the process of writing, this notion of construction was emphasised.

The children then worked in pairs, choosing key images from their finished poems and transferring them onto strips of paper. Those strips were then assembled on the table-top into a new, collaborative text and the children had to edit for grammar, tense, continuity and meaning, until a new text emerged. This was based around a question I presented: 'If we knocked down the sheepfold and re-built it, would it be the same sheepfold?' Clearly the components are the same, but the new fold would be different in form. Our new poem[155] could be read in any direction and from any point, so the reader effectively, re-constructed it at each reading. Like the disposition of sheefolds on the drove road at Casterton where the project was based, the poem implies a journey, but one which can begin and end at any point.

In response to a further question: 'Can a waller use the same stone twice in the same wall?' we replicated some lines of poetry and built a refrains into the piece. Here we were defining a quality of language which stone does not have: the ability to be in more than one place at once. Furthermore, though the words are the same, the context leads to a new recognition, so the words are

[154] Andy Goldsworthy was commissioned by Cumbria County Council to build or restore 100 sheepfolds throughout Cumbria, each one of which contains an artwork. These in turn have become the stimulus for an education programme in Cumbrian schools

[155] See Appendix 12, p210

both the same and different. The text of the poem now awaits installation on the school website alongside photographic images taken on the stimulus day. It could just as easily be installed as an environmental 'poetry trail', used as the basis for choral performance with its implication of different voices, or installed in the air as a mobile.

This project developed an existing idea that I had held about the writing process for some time - the notion of construction - but linked it very directly to stone. A new and more specific paradigm for the process emerged which helped the children to understand a relatively abstract process (writing poetry) in a directly practical way and in the social context of group work. The sheepfold which holds sheep and their history, became a metaphor for poems which held memory, meaning and experience. The sense of poems as structures was established very strongly, but the sense of a fluid structure was also realised. That was also enabled through the children's grasp of the relationship between stone and water at every point in its 'life' from sedimentation to dissolution. Seen in geological time, stone is a fluid element; seen in human time stone is rigid, forming structures are continually falling and being re-built.

The collaborative process is also an important aspect of this example, and I have used it many times. This attempts to challenge the notion of the artist as isolated genius, challenging Celan's metaphor head-on. Poems derived from the oral tradition (*'The Seafarer'*, *'Beowulf'*) often have no identifiable author and have been re-shaped by generations of poets and scribes in their re-telling. Significantly, they have also been shaped by audience response and by bards who moved from a listening to a performing stance. That sense of literature belonging to a community and growing from its collective experience seems a very powerful message to children whose experience of the world is often fragmented and competitive. The building of a collaborative poem from shared language through shared experience has for me a restorative and progressive quality, just as the taking hold of experience through imaginative writing offers a balance of control and excitement. Writing in education fulfils a political agenda through a sense of individual empowerment, a recognition that, as John Holt observes:

The child is curious. He wants to make sense out of things, find out how things work, gain

competence and control over himself and his environment, do what he can see other people doing. He is open, receptive and perceptive. He does not shut himself off from the strange, confused, complicated world around him...to find out how reality works he works on it.[156]

In this sense the child *works* on the world through language, the synthesis of reality and imagination, the transformative power of narrative and poetry which express and translate the world on the child's own terms. I see that agenda as no different for the adult student, though some of the child's curiosity and openness has to be re-learned.

More and more in educational projects I am prepared to intervene as an artist, as well as an educator, or rather to educate directly through art rather than to bring about learning always through strategic processes. In the Casterton project described earlier, I gave the poem its final shape, using the children's words and the ideas that we had discussed together. At a simple level, this puts me alongside the children, working on our collaborative piece and though the language structures in the resulting poem are quite simple, the conception that has built up alongside the poem has progressed my educational ideas and my notions of poetic form as a process of psychic construction and dissolution. So work which might be seen by some writers as a bread-and-butter means of supporting their writing for me has become part of a much wider creative process where educational work is an allegory of the personal creative process; where education, to put it simply, has become an art. As an educator, that fulfils the core objective of my professional mission through deploying the processes that define me as a writer. Both education and art become co-terminus in their mission to challenge, construct, dissolve and re-construct experience into meaningful forms.

This is not to argue that educational work never interferes with creative work, since there are times when the sheer time-committment to educational projects pushes out the creative impulse. I do feel that educational and creative ideas have a common source and can have a shared mission. Poet Vicki Feaver, a teacher at University College Chichester, discusses these issues in a recent NAWE News[157] article:

Why is it then, that I'm not always filled with creative energy and excitement by my job? Why don't I feel that it feeds my writing more? One reason is that any kind of teaching is draining - a

[156] Holt, 1967, p169
[157] Feaver, 2000, p32

giving out of energy. Another, I think, is that teaching draws primarily on the analytical and critical side of the brain. Imaginative thinking is constantly channelled not into the writing, but into improving the content of modules and method of delivery.

This is a common argument amongst creative writing teachers, but I've argued earlier that the engagement with written processes feeds the creative work of OCA tutors by creating a unique discourse that engages with their own work. I would further argue that working as a practitioner in other educational settings (where creative work is built into challenging forms) is also a means of energising an aspect of writing which needs to engage with form and structure as well as with the spontaneous impulse to write new work.

Such educational, installation, performance and broadcast projects have helped me to establish ideas about language in fairly concrete and dramatic form, but the influence on my other writing - poems and short fiction - has been more subtle, because less self-consciously working towards an effect. In both cases I have become very aware of the tensions underlying the structure of the text and see the where deeper linguistic relationships are enacted. I have been very influenced by the notion of story as parable and my poems have a strong narrative content, whilst the stories are moving towards looser, more fluid poetic structures. There are dangers there in both directions - that the stories become flimsy and lacking in development, and that the poems get too earth-bound within a narrative stance - but I think that there is also a movement in both areas towards greater uncertainty.

For me this is the most exciting development because uncertainty needs technique to sustain it for a reader. Every writer can easily write their own kind of story or poem, putting themselves on 'automatic pilot'. I become very conscious of this when writing in workshops or creating exemplar drafts when teaching. In both the short fiction and poetry submitted here I think that there is a move from a reliance on setting and archetypal character towards a much more fluid, much less obviously purposeful writing, which has allowed the stories greater surprise and delicacy. Since the stories span the whole period of this project and even anticipate it a little, the progression from *A Walk In The Snow* or *Garnet* through to *The Prince* or *Why I've Always loved Fishmongers*, is, I think quite strongly evident.

The poems in *Circular Breathing* are part of a similar progression, but they

were written in the middle period of the period of OCA development and represent a shorter span of stylistic progression. They experiment with a range of narrative poems from the fairly tightly circumscribed pieces such as *Runaway*, *Inheritance* and *A Quiet Bloke*, to the much looser narrative movement of *Circular Breathing*, *Dreams of the Circus Dwarf* and *Hysterectomy*. In all my poetry collections I have used sequences as a means of creating poetic 'novellas' - notably *A Halifax Cider Jar*[158] , *Into the Ashes*[159] , *An Iron Age Woman*[160] , *The Red Field*[161] . In the collection, *Circular Breathing,*[162] this sequencing is evident in *A House of Glass*, whilst the sonnets in *The Hurts* experiments with a non-narrative sequencing. More recent work includes *Cuba Libre at the Café España,*[163] originally written for the page; then installed on the Internet as an interactive sequence with photographic images acting as 'hot buttons'; now forming the basis for a new radio drama proposal to BBC radio.

In many ways these developments are a symptom of a wider movement in my work, in that they are introducing more space into the process, leaving the reader more scope for interpretation, more room to inhabit the writing. I have little doubt that this is related to my more conscious thinking about the reader and their positioning in relation to the text which resulted from my OCA development work and this PhD research as it began to consolidate. I've no doubt, either, that the new creative work I produce will feed into the educational process to which I remain committed. In this sense I hope to move forward on all fronts, developing new distance learning initiatives which can be enabled by new information technology; new poems which explore the emotional, political and dramatic territory ahead; new stories that are more supple and spacious in texture; new radio productions which extends my ideas about form, creating a synthesis between storytelling, poetry, performance and recorded sound.

'All art,' wrote the photographer, Ansell Adams, 'is a vision penetrating the illusions of reality'[164]. Writing is a quest for this 'vision' of artistic truth, a moment in which, as Raymond Carver remarked:

[158] Yorkshire Art Circus, 1987
[159] Littlewood Press, 1988
[160] Sky Burial, Dangaroo Press, 1989
[161] Snow from the North, Dangaroo Press, 1992
[162] Dangaroo Press, 1997
[163] Poetry Society , Poetry Places, Website, 1999, http://www.poetrysoc.com
[164] Adams, 1979,p7

Our hearts and intellects will have been moved off the peg just a little from where they were before. Our body temperature will have gone up or down by a degree.Then, breathing evenly and steadily once more, we'll collect ourselves, writers and readers alike, get up, 'created of warm blood and nerves', as a Chekhov character puts it, and then go onto the next thing: Life, always life.[165]

Education is also a quest for the same effect: a unification of what is known and what is felt and experienced through a challenge which energises and transforms the way we experience our lives internally and externally.

Art *is* education and education is the art of possibility. To be human and alive is to be endlessly curious about our human condition. That curiosity is far more important than technical skills as a basis for the student artist. If we have curiosity, the rest will follow: writing directly from our organical perceptions, discovering the infinite, telling lies in order to reach the truth, re-inventing the past, inventing the present, remembering the future.

But we also have to live inside the opportunities and dangers of Celan's metaphor of messages in bottles which forms the title for this project and provides a resonant framework for both educational and creative endeavour. One of my own stories picks this idea up[166] :

Jenny remembered the cedars of Lebanon, their blue-green needles, their sweet smelling sawdust. She would like a chest of cedar wood in which to keep white cotton sheets. Sheets that she could lift out and hold against her face and luxuriate in. She thought of the river and the sea again. All across the world waves were breaking against deserted shorelines. Footprints were being washed away on dark beaches, driftwood reclaimed by the tides. Somewhere there'd be a bottle with a message in it. The glass milky, scarred by years of chinking across shingle in hidden coves. Inside, a scrap of paper, some barely decipherable writing. To get at the message she'd smash the bottle on a rock against which the sea was lapping. She'd hold the glass in her hands, swinging back her arm to hurl it. Then the paper, unfolding under her fingers, written in a foreign tongue, its message incomprehensible. Out of reach.

Out of reach, perhaps. But perhaps not, because I'd like to think that this story expressed the precariousness of connection, not its impossibility. To understand the difficulty of any possibility is to appreciate its flowering when it eventually occurs. The message and the bottle are a metaphor, not an

[165] Carver, 1993, Author's Forward
[166] Mort, 2000, p138

oubliette. Here's how the story ends:

Rain plastered the hair over Jenny's forehead, dripping down her face, soaking her blouse and running over her breasts. It was drenching her whole body. She turned her face towards the rain. The water splashed softly against her mouth and eyes. She held out the parched palms of her hands for the rain to fall on them. Tonight the husks of seeds would swell and split. Tomorrow the first green shoots would emerge, turning slowly to the sun. The earth would be moist and dark and there would be new life stirring in it. New life. She never wanted to move from this moment. Never.

Graham Mort, August 2000

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Appendices

Appendix 1

OCA Creative Writing Learning Journal

OCA Creative Writing Learning Journal

Dear Student,

This ring-binder has been provided for storing and developing your Learning Journal throughout your course. The Learning Journal differs from all your other course materials and documents in that it has a *critical and reflective* emphasis, rather than a purely creative one.

You should divide it into at least the following sections:

An Introduction which will contain your Student Profile and the initial correspondence from your tutor.

Six other sections labelled Assignments 1-6.

An Appendix which you can use for your own purposes.

The Learning Journal has been designed to serve several functions; some of these are practical ones - like storing assignments and drafts - but its main function is to help you develop critical perspectives on your work. This is especially important in helping you to feel that you're making progress, that you're actually *becoming* a writer.

Some parts of the journal will remain purely personal - the Appendix, for instance - but its 'core elements', the Assignment Commentaries, will be written for your tutor. The more you reflect on the creative process whilst doing the course, the more clearly you will understand your own work. If your tutor understands your intentions and the problems you have encountered then they will be able to advise you more helpfully.

Although the Learning Journal is a personal response, we have made what we hope are helpful suggestions about how you might maintain it. It is essentially a chronological account and will record the way your own thinking about what you write changes and develops as the course unfolds.

Upon completion of the course the Learning Journal should contain a very comprehensive record of each individual assignment, as well as forming a complete account of your experience of the course. For students opting for a graded assessment of their work, the Learning Journal will form a vital component in their assessment folio.

The next section of the Learning Journal contains a more detailed breakdown of what it should contain. Good luck with the course,

Best wishes,

Graham Mort, Creative Writing Course Leader

Creative Writing Learning Journal

Submitting work to your tutor - the Assignment Commentary

When sending your work to your tutor you should always include a detailed accompanying letter - which we will call an Assignment Commentary from now on. This is a formal term but it does not mean that your letter has to be formal in style. Think of it as a personal letter from you to your tutor. It should be an account of no more than 1,000 words which offers *your response to the experience of writing your assignment.*

Your Assignment Commentary should describe any difficulties that you've had with your writing or the exercises leading up to it. It should also try to define any sense of achievement that this piece of work has brought you. You need to make two copies of this letter, one for your tutor and one for your Learning Journal. You will also need to make a copy of your Student Profile for your Learning Journal.

When you've moved past our first assignment, you should also make some comments on what your tutor has said about your last piece of work and describe any action you have taken to re-draft it. This will help your tutor to understand the context for each new piece of work you send, how helpful their advice has been, and how they might guide you in the future.

You should not send your tutor re-drafted work, but incorporate the techniques which you have learned into your next piece of writing. Your tutor may not always comment directly on what you say in your Assignment Commentary, but they will read it carefully and pick up its key concerns as they respond to your work through their tutorial report.

Although your Assignment Commentary needn't be written in a very formal style it is helpful to give it a clear structure. There are no rules for what it should contain, but you might consider making remarks about some of the following points:

- How helpful or otherwise you found the information and examples in the coursebook in relation to your assignment.

- How you set about the exercises which led up to your assignment and how useful they proved.
- How you tackled the drafting process and how this led in turn to the present assignment.
- What you felt you were trying to achieve or communicate through your writing.
- How well the finished piece of writing measure up to your expectations and how it changed in the process of being drafted.
- Any areas of that assignment that you feel dissatisfied with.
- Aspects of the assignment where you have experimented with new techniques or techniques carried forward from previous assignments.
- Guidance you might need in order to re-draft and develop the assignment.
- How helpful you found your tutor's comments on your previous assignment.
- Action you have taken to improve work as a result of your tutor's comments on your previous assignment.

Learning Journal Contents

Introduction

- Your Student Profile
- Your tutor's introductory letter

Sections 1-6

- Initial drafts for the assignment.
- A copy of the assignment which your tutor has marked and which they may have written comments on.
- A copy of your Assignment Commentary.
- A copy of your tutor's report.

- Any revisions of this piece of work.

Appendix

This section of the journal is for your personal informal use, but we'd suggest that it might contain the following:

- A log-book of your progress through the course recording your thoughts and reactions to what you are writing and learning. This could be a very useful reference section when writing your Assignment Commentaries.

- A list of any text-books you've read whilst doing the course with appropriate comments. This could include any text-books supplied by OCA.

- A list of new literature you have read whilst doing the course and which your tutor may have recommended. These could be written as brief 'reviews'. It would be of particular interest to record how such books have influenced your own writing - or haven't!

- Accounts of radio plays, films or theatrical performances which you may have seen whilst doing the course.

- Articles about creative writing which you might have found in professional publications.

- When you have finished the course a short reflective account of your experience of it.

- Any other relevant information.

Appendix 2

OCA Writing Prospectus

OPEN COLLEGE OF THE ARTS

The Open College of the Arts is an educational trust providing home-based education. It has a range of courses in the visual and performing arts, design, writing and photography.

OCA is affiliated to The Open University. Most of the writing courses featured here are accredited by the University of Glamorgan.

Further information and advice can be obtained from Student Services at the college - phone: 01226 730495.

Creative Writing Prospectus

If you are considering taking an OCA course in creative writing or reading, this prospectus will provide you with the information you require. Distance learning, is a well established tutorial method used throughout the world to support students studying at home. OCA has adapted ideas already used successfully by The Open University and applied them to practical arts courses.

OCA is dedicated to lifelong learning in the arts, providing opportunities for a wide variety of students.You may have been out of education for a long time and feel yourself to be an absolute beginner. You may have experimented in the arts on your own or attended adult education classes. In either case, you do not need any qualifications to enrol; all that is needed is time and commitment. We provide you with all the help and information you need to begin your course and encourage you to become more self-reliant as you progress through its structured programme of study.

Many of our students take a course simply for the pleasure of personal achievement. Others use OCA courses to accumulate credit towards a higher-education qualification, or to build up a portfolio of work in order to

apply for a full-time under- graduate or post-graduate course.

All our courses have a course book which sets out a programme of work. The course book provides support and advice to enable you to work confidently on your own. For the writing course, text books are also provided. Choices widen as courses progress, offering you the opportunity to move gradually to more self-directed work.

The Courses and Tutors

Our writing courses help you to get started and to keep going; the emphasis is on writing from direct experience and transforming it through the imagination into literary form. Everyone can write creatively, but the first step is believing in your own experience as a starting point. The courses focus on awakening the senses and imagination in order to re-create experience; their purpose is to help you to bring that world to life for your readers.

We make no inflated claims that doing an OCA course will lead to literary or commercial success. We do claim, however, that our courses are realistic and practically based, offering basic, blow-by-blow support as well as more philosophical stimulus.

At the introductory level is *Starting to Write* which has been running for more than nine years. Four thousand people have already successfully taken this course. You can then go on to a further course such as *The Experience of Poetry*, *Lifelines* or *Storylines* dealing with poetry, autobiographical writing and short fiction. And at the *Advanced* level of study you can choose from a wide range of literary forms and work on a personal writing programme. If you already have some writing experience, then you can choose any of the courses and enrol upon them.

We have a team of over thirty tutors who are trained and supported by the OCA writing school. They are all professional writers - published poets, scriptwriters and authors of fiction - and are also experienced creative writing tutors.

Each tutor works with a small number of students only, employing the teaching and support methods developed by OCA. Tutors are to be found throughout the UK and reflect this cultural diversity. Scottish or Welsh students can ask for a tutor from their own cultural background.

As you move from one level of study to another, increasing emphasis is placed on the individual skills and specialisms of those tutors and on their relationship with you. The coursebooks form the backbone of the writing courses, but the input of your tutor is tailored to your own needs and is an essential part of the course.

Upon completing the course, you will have a comprehensive portfolio of creative work, including notebooks and your learning journal.

The course book provides a framework for study, but your tutor plays a major part in supporting you The learning journal acts as an intermediary; your tutor is able to understand your problems from what you write there and to provide detailed and supportive feedback on the creative work itself. Our tutors are all practising, published writers as well as experienced teachers. OCA offers them training in distance learning teaching techniques and we keep in touch with them through a programme of staff development.

Each student has their own tutor. You start the course by sending them a Student Profile giving details about your experience and aspirations. Then you begin to work from the course book, sending work to your tutor at key points in the course. One of the advantages of postal tuition is its flexibility, which allows you to work at your own pace within reasonable limits.

Your tutor gives the work you send careful attention and returns it to you with a written report offering constructive and detailed criticism, including advice on re-drafting.

Courses with postal tutorials operate successfully over any distance and we have students all over the world. Postal study may also be especially suited to those with a disability or whose mobility is limited.

Choosing A Course

Starting to Write is the introductory course and, unless you have some previous experience of writing, we recommend that you complete this before moving on to a further course of study. It has a very supportive structure and you will be able to take advantage of the detailed guidance in the coursebook.

After *Starting to Write* you could enrol for *Lifelines*, which offers support through exercises and assignments. If you have some writing experience, you may enrol directly onto this course.

You might wish to progress to, or enrol directly on to, *The Experience of Poetry* or *Storylines*. These courses feature coursebooks which offer a broader stimulus without specific writing exercises. On these courses you will need to be able to work independently and to develop your own ideas, using techniques similar to those developed through *Starting to Write*.

The *Advanced* courses can be approached directly by more experienced students who wish to develop their work through a close working relationship with a published writer. There are no course materials - though the tutor may recommend helpful texts - and students need to be fairly autonomous.

Students with some experience of creative writing who wish to enter directly on to a course other than *Starting to Write* should look carefully at the levels of achievement expected. You are free to enter at whatever level you personally regard as appropriate, but higher-level study is demanding and does assume that you already possess writing skills.

OCA will provide direct-entry students with coursebooks from the previous level of study as additional support, so you will always have access to a source of stimulus or guidance.

OCA Tutors:

Mathew Black, John Cassidy, Ailsa Cox, Robert Drake, Mark Illis, Char March, Dorothy Nimmo, Maggie O'Sullivan, Meg Peacocke, Irene Rawnsley, Rebecca O'Rourke, Alicia Stubbersfield, Katherine Gallagher, Philip Gross, Elizabeth North, Kathy Page, Sibyl Ruth, Laurence Staig, Chris Sykes, Lis Whitelaw, Stephen Knight, Sara Maitland, Siri Hansen, Paul Groves, Michael Bangerter, Moniza Alvi, Linda Acaster,Alan Wilkinson, Margaret Murphy, Anita Mason.

The Arts Council of England Literature Department provided development funding for the Creative Writing courses and continues to support them.

Postgraduate Study

An increasing number of OCA students have now moved on to MA writing courses, successfully presenting their OCA folios in order to satisfy the entry requirements. In most cases these are students who already hold first degrees, but this is no longer a requirement for every MA writing course. The University of Glamorgan and Lancaster University both provide MA's in creative writing taught by distance learning.

Direct Entry Onto Higher Level Courses

When there are higher level courses, you normally start from the first level. Students with previous experience who wish to enter directly on a higher level course should look carefully at the content of lower level courses. You may enter at any level, but higher-level study is demanding and assumes you already possess relevant skills. We provide direct-entry students with course books from the previous level as extra support, so you always have access to stimulus or guidance. If you are thinking of entering directly at a higher level phone Student Services at OCA, who will be pleased to advise you. You can only receive credit points (see below) for courses you actually take.

Quick Guide:

Level 1

Starting to Write - no experience needed.

Lifelines - some writing experience recommended.

Level 2

The Experience of Poetry - some experience essential

Storylines - some experience essential

Level 3

Advanced courses - students should already have experience and a strong folio of work.

Certificates and Academic Credit

On successfully completing an OCA course you automatically receive a Record of Completion.

If you want a graded assessment of your work this is also available (except for Creative Reading);. A selection of work done while on your course is submitted for assessment by a team of assessors. The assessors grade your work and an OCA Award is issued. Details of the procedure, assessment criteria and advice on submission are published in the Student Handbook.

Students receiving the Award may apply for credit points, tradable on the UK CATS scheme, from University of Glamorgan. Full information about credit points and qualifications is in the *Guide*, and may also be had by contacting Student Services at OCA.

Time Guide

It is difficult to give hard and fast indicators of how long a course should take - this depends to an extent on your own way of working and how much time you can give to the course. But there are some general guidelines given in the course descriptions.

If you plan to have your writing assessed for the OCA Award you definitely need to spend considerably more than the minimum time, as you need to follow up a wider range of interests and accumulate a portfolio of work in a systematic way.

'Crossing the Border' - OCA's Writing Journal

The publication of a journal of student writing has now become a regular feature of the OCA writing courses. Students working on all levels of study are invited to submit their work, which is subject to a rigorous editorial process similar to that of a mainstream literary magazine.

Only the very best work submitted achieves publication in the journal, which also publishes articles by tutors and students about their experience as writers. *Crossing the Border* gives students experience of submitting work for publication, and the journals themselves act as invaluable reference points for new students coming on to the courses.

Residential Writing Courses

There are occasional residential writing courses led by OCA tutors and based at the Arvon Foundation at Lumb Bank in West Yorkshire. These are an opportunity for you to get together with other students and to meet tutors in a stimulating and convivial atmosphere. These residential weeks extend ideas contained in the courses and are open to students working at all levels. Residential courses do not form an integral part of the correspondence course and a separate charge is made for them. The Arvon Foundation centre has facilities for disabled students.

Writing for Blind or Partially Sighted Students

The Experience of Poetry is on audio-tape and all courses can be provided in large type; OCA has worked with the RNIB to produce an introductory tape for blind and partially sighted students. That cassette is available on request.

Every blind or partially-sighted student is assigned to an experienced tutor committed to their special needs. The College consults the RNIB over the provision of specialist equipment when necessary. Further information is available from Student Services at OCA.

The Courses In Detail

Starting to Write (Level 1)

This is an introductory course designed to help those who have never written before as well as those with experience but who may be suffering from writer's block or sheer lack of ideas. The aim is to encourage you to believe in your own experience as a source of ideas.

We send you the *Starting to Write* coursebook and two supplementary texts as background reading. The coursebook is a practical workshop manual which takes you through the course in stages, building each assignment through a series of writing exercises.

The course covers:

- keeping a notebook and commonplace book as a source of ideas
- recording experiences using sensory awareness
- making and revising drafts
- building poems from notes
- building descriptive prose passages
- writing about people
- exploring dialogue
- authorial viewpoint
- style and language: syntax, imagery, metaphor
- exploring powerful themes and issues
- creating and presenting manuscripts.

The course takes you through a variety of literary forms, including poetry, short fiction and play scripts; it has been designed to offer structured support and a flexible range of options. You will be able to concentrate on the literary form of your choice as the course progresses. If you can give 6 hours a week to the course you will probably complete it in 6 to 9 months.

Starting to Write is an excellent introduction to the art of creative writing, dealing with the fundamental issues that even very experienced writers confront in each new piece of work.

Lifelines (Level 1)

This course is open to those who have completed *Starting to Write* or to students with some writing experience who wish to enrol directly onto a more specialised course. It aims to help those interested in autobiographical writing to accumulate material from a diversity of sources and then to put that material together in a satisfying way. The course will help you to create a folio of writing which could help you to go on to create your autobiography or the biography of a family member.

The course covers:

- identifying key points in your experience
- exploring narrative techniques through writing exercises
- creating and collating pieces of autobiographical writing
- developing awareness of your place in contemporary society
- becoming familiar with the distinctive genre of autobiography
- testing different ways of structuring writing
- creating a varied portfolio of autobiographical writing.

The Experience of Poetry (Level 2)

This course is open to students who have completed *Starting to Write* or to more experienced students who wish to enrol directly onto a specialised course.

You receive *The Experience of Poetry*, a guide, stimulus and source of information. This offers historical perspectives on the development of poetry within the UK, a comprehensive reading list and examples of contemporary poetry with accompanying notes. The coursebook examines the techniques of modern poetry and has a glossary of technical terms. Its structure develops from an analysis of the relationship between form and theme; you will be able to design your own assignments from the suggestions the coursebook makes.

The course covers:

- short lyric poems
- the poem-sequence
- narrative poems
- the long poem

• writing in traditional forms
• handling poetic themes
• drafting and revision techniques.

You are assigned to a specialist tutor who is a published poet. There are 6 assignments; if you work on the course for an average 6 hours a week you should complete it in 9 to 12 months.

Storylines (Level 2)
This course is open to those who have completed *Starting to Write* or to more experienced students who wish to enrol directly onto a specialised course. The course focusses on the writing of short fiction and you will receive *Storylines*, a coursebook designed as a guide, stimulus and source of information.

It contains a history of the development of short fiction in the UK, a comprehensive reading list and an analysis of the evolution of contemporary narrative techniques. The coursebook also contains extensive examples of short stories by contemporary writers with accompanying essays written by their authors. You design your own assignments from the suggestions that the coursebook makes.

The course covers:
• the evolution of modern short fiction
• narrative modes
• narrative technique and subject matter
• narrative perspectives and authorial viewpoint
• narrative and dialogue
• structuring a short story
• drafting and revision techniques.

You are assigned a tutor who is a published author of short fiction. There are 6 assignments; if you work on the course for an average 6 hours a week you should complete it in 9 to 12 months.

Advanced Writing (Level 3)
Writing courses at advanced level are available for students who have

successfully completed earlier courses or to experienced students who wish to work closely with a published writer on a creative project. Advanced options are essentially personal writing programmes structured to fit our model of home-study.

You work closely with a specialist writer, choosing your tutor from a folio of options which include poetry, short fiction, extended fiction autobiography and writing for children. The course allows longer for research and the maturation and revision of drafts. An introductory tutorial allows you and your tutor to discuss what form the year's study should take. When you have reached an agreement this is recorded as a basis for the writing programme which follows. There are no new course materials, though the earlier coursebooks form a basis for your writing.

There are 6 assignments and if you work on the course for an average of 6 hours a week you should complete it in about 12 months.

Reading between the Lines

This course has been created by writing and reading specialists for both writers and readers. Unlike writing courses this course has 'live' tutorials which are conducted through telephone conferencing.

The course book contains an introduction to the ideas and philosophy behind the course which involves writing about books as well as reading them. With the course book come two additional texts, *Opening The Book* (Rachel van Riel & Olive Fowler) and *A History Of Reading* (Alberto Manguel) as supportive material. A reading list of six books is also included.

Students belong to a tutorial group and amongst the course materials are the names, addresses and telephone numbers of the other five members of that group. The tutor is responsible for chairing telephone conferences. Students produce written responses - interpretations - on two of the books for circulation to other students on the course and these form the basis for tutorial discussions. These interpretations may encompass a wide range of responses from the more formal review to passages of purely expressive writing.

By the end of the course you should have

• Reflected upon your reading style and habits
• Gained confidence in and extended the range of your reading
• Discussed a variety of literature including poetry, short fiction, genre fiction,
autobiography and novels
•Explored the reading process in a structured way and annotated texts
•Discussed books with your tutor and other students, relating their value judgments
to your own
• Written responses to texts which articulate your ideas for others
• Kept a learning journal which details your responses to books and tutorial
discussions

It is difficult to give hard and fast indicators of how long a course should take - this depends to an extent on your own way of working and how much time you can give to the course. But there are some general guidelines given in the course descriptions.

Conditions of Enrolment

The fee includes the provision of course books and tutorial support. Any other activities, such as assessment for the OCA Award or attendance on a residential course, cost extra.

Once you have enrolled, the materials are non-returnable. If for any reason you wish to withdraw within 30 days of the receipt of materials we will refund course fees, less the deposit (see the box above) as a charge for materials and handling.

Refunds are not made after 30 days. Beyond 30 days and up to 6 months you may, on written request, defer your course once for up to a year; when you resume a charge will be made to cover administrative costs.

We offer instalment facilities on the understanding that all payments will be made.

Appendix 3

Graham Mort, Publications

GRAHAM MORT, PUBLICATIONS

POETRY BOOKS

A Country On Fire, Littlewood Press, 1986, 2nd. edition 1988
A Halifax Cider Jar, Yorkshire Art Circus, 1987
Into The Ashes, Littlewood Press, 1988
Sky Burial, Dangaroo Press, 1989
Snow From The North, Dangaroo Press, 1992
Circular Breathing, Dangaroo Press, 1997 (Poetry Book Society Recommendation)

SHORT STORIES

Panurge, The Guardian, Critical Quarterly, Krax, Global Tapestry, Fisheye,The North, Metropolitan, Northern Short Stories 1989 (Littlewood Press), Bright Streets Dark Corners, (Unwin Hyman), BBC Radio 3, BBC Radio Lancashire, BBC Radio North-West, Northern Short Stories 1996 (Arc Publications), London Magazine, Fish Publishing Short Story Anthology.

RADIO/TELEVISION BROADCASTS

BBC Radio Lancashire, BBC Radio North-West, Red Rose Radio, BBC Radio 3 Short Story, Yorkshire TV `Northern Lights', BBC World Service English by Radio & TV, BBC Radio 3 `New Voices', BBC North-West `Write Now', BBC Radio 4 `Get Writing', Yorkshire TV `Pieces of Parkin', BBC Radio 3 `Between The Ears' (Poetry Anthology), BBC Radio 4 'Books & Sport', BBC Radio 4 Stanza, BBC Radio 4 Drama.

BBC RADIO 4 COMMISSIONS

The Red Field BBC Radio 4, twenty minute, dramatic poem, 1997
The Life Of The Bee BBC Radio 4, Friday Night Play,1999

EDUCATIONAL BOOKS

Starting To Write Open College of The Arts, 1990, new Eds., '92, '96
The Experience Of Poetry Open College of the Arts, 1991
Storylines Open College of the Arts, 1992
Reading Between The Lines [editor] Olive Fowler & Rachel van Riel, OCA, 1997
Lifelines (editor), Brian Lewis & Reinhi Schülle,OCA, 1996

REVIEWS & ARTICLES

The Green Book, Orbis, Poetry Review, Yorkshire Art Scene, NAWE News, Times Educational Supplement, Poetry Wales, Poetry Society Teacher's Resource Files, The North.

ACADEMIC PAPERS

'Messages in Bottles' - Sheffield Hallam University Conference Proceedings, 1999.
'Verbal Engineering' - Sheffield Hallam University Conference Proceedings, 2000

EDITORIAL

Anthologies/Magazines

Giant Steps poetry magazine, issues 1-10, 1983-1988
Crossing The Border Open College of the Arts Anthology, 1992 onwards (issues 1-4)
NAWE Writers Directory (Northern Association of Writers in Education), 1988, 1990.

Giant Steps Poetry Books

Reflections Of The Dawntester Graham Sykes, Giant Steps, 1986
Effects of War, John Lancaster, Giant Steps, 1986
The Stone Spiral, Terry Gifford, Giant Steps, 1987
Against Looting, David Craig, Giant Steps, 1987
Homewards, Dorothy Nimmo, Giant Steps, 1987
Turbulence, Maura Dooley, Giant Steps, 1988

Novels

The Labour Man Jim Wilson, Yorkshire Art Circus, 1996
Flood Tom Watts, Yorkshire Art Circus, 1997

AWARDS & LITERARY PRIZES

Cheltenham Poetry Competition, first prize, 1979
Cheltenham Poetry Competition, first prize, 1982
Duncan Lawrie Prize, Arvon Foundation International Poetry Competition, 1982
Major Eric Gregory Award, Society Authors, 1985
Runner-up, National Poetry Competition, 1987
Northern Short Stories Competition, second-prize, 1988
Duncan Lawrie Prize, Arvon Foundation International Poetry Competition, 1992
Writers Award, Society Authors Foundation Fund, 1993
Duncan Lawrie Prize, Arvon Foundation International Poetry Competition, 1994
Arts Council Great Britain/BBC Radio `Write Out Loud' award, 1996
Northern Short Stories Competition prizewinner, 1996
Prizewinner 'Highly Commended' category, National Poetry Competition, 1996
Poetry Book Society Recommendation, 'Circular Breathing', Dangaroo Press 1997
Northern Short Stories Competition, Runner Up, 1997
Stand Short Story Competition, Runner Up, 1997
Blue Nose Poetry Competition, Shortlist, 2000
Stand Poetry Competition, Runner Up 2000.

Appendix 4

OCA sample tutorial reports

OPEN COLLEGE OF THE ARTS TUTOR REPORT
Example 1

Course Starting to Write
Student Name
Student Number 244057
Assignment No 6
Next Assignment Due
Tutor Graham Mort

8.2.99.

Dear

First of all my apologies for not getting this final assignment back to you quite as soon as I indicated earlier - I've been working away from home for most of January and wanted to give your work my considered, rather than hurried, attention!

I read 'A War To Be Proud Of' with great interest and found a lot in it to admire, though I also thing that there are some areas that still need attention. I liked the assured opening lines of the story which get things underway quickly and establish the character of the narrator through a tone of self-deprecating irony. You take advantage of notions of 'Englishness' to set that tone and establish a strong sense of voice in the piece. This creates confidence in the reader and admits them into your fictional world with a sense of privilege and intimacy, as if they already know you, and ties them firmly into the narrative.

That opening section has a kind of summative feel; you're catching up with events and setting the scene and aren't afraid to comment on what you're telling us: 'I began to understand the difference between those who survive a war and those who merely live through it.' Again, that helps to establish the voice and character of the narrator, making your account more personal and authentic. On page 2 the story slips into what we might call 'real time' with events unfolding before the reader's eyes and ears. The scene with the father watching the Frenchman in the garden is

nicely drawn and takes us into the sensitivity of a childhood world where parents are always a potential embarrassment. The dialogue brings the story to life there and we get a direct sense of character through the speech. I did begin to wonder what the parents actually looked like, and some touches of detail there might have helped us to understand them as physical beings in the way that we're allowed a glimpse of the Frenchman - though you'd have to be careful not to throw in a series of character portraits just for the sake of it!

On page three I felt that the pace of the story began to suffer a little from the summative technique that you use on page 1. The passage of time is an important factor in any story and things seem to speed up at this point. After our introduction to the Frenchman we're taken rapidly through the day which is almost dismissed in a few words and, suddenly, we're there in the evening. I think it might have been more artful to linger on that day, using it to establish more about the place the children and the parents, so that by the time they return to the boarding house at night they've almost forgotten about the Frenchman. He can then be reintroduced to the reader in a way that makes it slightly less obvious that he's the main focus of the story. So a little playful deception there might keep the reader interested.

There are some lovely touches of detail in the story - I especially liked the skin forming on the plates of tomato soup which is somehow so gauche and English - and these have the effect of consolidating the story into specific and memorable moments of time. Again part of the art of managing time in a story is to make it move quickly when you want to move things, but to almost make it stand still when something important is happening. The way to slow it down is often by offering the reader a moment of lingering detail. There are three important exchanges where I feel that you should really slow down the story and get the reader inside that moment - where the Frenchman tells of his wartime experience, where he admonishes Alice for wasting bread and where she later offers him the bread in a moment of 'healing'. They're all key points in the story, but you almost pass over them - in fact each one goes faster than the previous one if you look at the chronology of the story.

I wonder about having a Frenchman called 'Pierre' too. That seems a very conventional sense of foreignness, making him almost a school text-book Frenchman. I think that a more unusual name might emphasis his foreignness and perhaps you could work on his speech patterns to give them a slightly more hesitant feel as he struggles for words. He just seems slightly too fluent in places!

The very end of the story too, seems to move very quickly over a very long period of time where many important things happen. Here you're very definitely 'telling' the reader rather than 'showing' them. Although what you say is interesting, it's also a bit frustrating because we can't really get inside the events at that level of narration. This is almost the synopsis for a new story and I wonder whether it should be in at all. The original story seems to end naturally in the previous paragraph with Alice offering Pierre the bread in a moment of dramatic tension, though as I've said, that moment could be developed much more.

Removing that last ending would take away a certain 'neatness' which you introduce as you tie up the loose ens and put all the characters to bed. I think that this would make you work harder inside the existing story to establish the frisson of attraction between Pierre and Cathy. Without us glimpsing the physicality of Cathy as I said earlier, then it's hard to see her appeal to Pierre. You mention this mutual attraction in your letter, but it's never really developed in the story.

My last point is to return to the idea of authorial viewpoint and I wonder to what extent you see this story as fiction and to what extent it's autobiographical writing which has emerged with some difficulty, as you indicate in your covering letter. I feel that it has a lot of potential to become a dramatic and engaging piece, but perhaps its historical 'truth' has inhibited you a little from taking liberties with it and placing it more firmly into a fictional framework.

The present story has some lovely moments. It conveys a strong sense of period and opens up the feelings of a child at that time. There is some fine, confident, narrative writing but that confidence slips a little by the end as the emotional waters deepen. I felt as if I'd read a synopsis in

some ways and longed for a slower, more lingering narrative which really dramatises the material and perhaps isn't quite so neatly finished off. The reader doesn't have to know how things work out and sometimes leaving the story unresolved can make it linger much more hauntingly in their imagination.

I notice in your letter to Geraldine that you mention the Level 2 fiction course and a lot of the issues that I've raised here are dealt with in that course. If you do decide to go on - and there's a lot in your writing which tells me that you should - then I think that course would help you to develop both technique and a' theoretical' awareness of narrative (it's not that dry, honest!).

Well done with this story. I hope my comments won't be discouraging but will be helpful in helping you to rework it to its full potential.

Best wishes,

Graham Mort

OPEN COLLEGE OF THE ARTS TUTOR REPORT

Example 2

Course The Experience of Poetry
Student Name
Student Number 254204
Assignment No 5
Next Assignment Due 1.2.99
Tutor Graham Mort

13.6.98

Dear

Thanks for this sequence which I approach with great interest, and for another marvellous assignment commentary which makes for very good reading. At the moment it seems that nothing could be nicer than sitting here with a glass of decent malt whiskey, listening to the wind screaming through darkness and the trees on the hillside out there - and contemplating your poems. It goes without saying that my remarks are always to be taken with a pinch of salt and that you should take them on board only insofar as they're useful to you and to agree with them at the time. Well, that's the disclaimer out of the way....

And a few good intentions out of the way since it's now the morning after I wrote that and time to re-visit the poem now that it's sunk in a bit. You talk about the title in your assignment commentary and in many ways it has even more significance in a sequence where part of the technique is to leave spaces between the poems so that the reader joins up the narrative for themselves. I'm not sure that 'Flight' does it here. It carries the irony of unrealised flight in the scorched bodies of the caterpillars and reflects the child's flight from conscience, but I'm not sure that it really resonates with the other undercurrent in the poem, which is the Vietnam war, or if it does, then very tangentially. There's a kind of distant connection between the hovering butterflies and the notion of helicopters, but you never spell it out.

All of which leads me into thinking about the main themes of the poem. The central image is of immolation - the suicide of the Buddhist monks, the napalm dropping onto civilians (that little girl running towards the camera with her skin in tatters), the child on that vaguely defined mission to 'get rid' of the caterpillars which leads to a sense of power, a Kurtz-like loss of control, an unsatisfied curiosity spurring him/her to a kind of My Lai. The poem touches upon power too: the authoritarian world that the child inhabits and his/her own authoritarian pogrom, with undertones of Dr. Mengele's experiments and the Judas-like kiss of silver.

The poem makes a cycle of violence in its structure and it represents a cycle in human affairs - the way the child interprets or acts out what is shown on the screen and the way the war enacts what is latent in the child. What's good about this poem is the way you don't decide for us what spurs the violence, whether it's in our nature - and 'nature' in the poem carries strong undertones of the garden of Eden, the Vietnam jungle, the subconscious, and lost innocence - or whether it's a distortion of a nurturing impulse since the gathering of the caterpillars is always seen in the context of the full-blown imago hovering close by.

None of which helps you with a title, but I still feel that the poem's real journey is towards atavism, the stripping back of childhood towards a primitivism that is both horrifying and deeply satisfying. In a strange way the violence in the poem implicates the reader and bonds them in a kind of reassuring way since we all remember some needless act of massacre which we experimented with when we were kids. There's something profoundly significant in that moment of remoteness from nature which makes us wound it into response, to try to find whether it feels as we feel. By which I mean that this poem has a go at some very important stuff about emergent humanity. In fact emergence is another strong theme - the emergent child, the emergent caterpillar, that sense of being poised on the edge of becoming something else - in the child's case a monster or a sensitised human being, sensitised, in fact by his/her own cruelty, which has to be a uniquely human trait.

The first down-to-earth point I'd like to make is that I've used his/her three

times in this report already and I can't find a hint as to whether the child addressed by the adult writer is a boy or a girl. I think that we need to know at some point, because it enriches the poem to know; it develops the child's relationship with the father and with the adult writer. Gender is also a key issue in our notion of human violence and who is most likely to perpetrate it. Clearly having a girl provides shock value and deepens some of the dilemmas. But it's an issue I think you have to get hold of because it bothers the reader not to know and the poem gains nothing by that opaqueness. Unless I've missed the obvious hint somewhere...

Flight

I don't think you need 'napalm' and 'attacks' in the first stanza here. Re-reading the poem I realise that the 'mirage' in stanza three must be the butterflies, but we're not certain and it's a bit vague - you could add detail there. I liked the 'played it like a puppy' image, it's actually quite horrifying to see that carelessness - the puppy appeals because it has large eyes like all mammal babies, but the caterpillar remains alien. I wasn't entirely convinced by the role of italics in stanza 7 - is this interior monologue or reported speech? I loved that moment which follows 'You wanted to pierce them with a look....' Again I'm not sure about the final italicised word *metamorphosis* - presumably echoing some text-book? If you put it in plain type it might actually feel more understated.

2. This one is beautifully done and took me right back to an incident in my own childhood, that intrusion into a forbidden world of *things*. I wondered about the 'white spurts grasped' which seems a bit muscle-bound. In stanza five the word 'monochrome' seems a bit forced and I'm not quite sure what I'm looking at. 'Transparency glinted, corona bottles sparkling blue' seems to do it more simply. I really liked the dead butterflies gliding down and that word *nothing* ready at the child's lips - italicised again, but reasonably so. I wonder about the verb 'fired' since that word *nothing* is something like an imago in the mouth's carapace. Perhaps I'm overdoing it there...

3. The context for this one's very interesting since it's the fear of exposure that leads to the child's complicity. A bit like a novel, the way the plot

sucks the child in there. This is a nicely controlled section and stanza 10 ('A halo of white butterflies...') is beautifully rhythmical, imaginatively transforming as an image and savagely ironic in its sanctification. Not a bad combination! The undertones of prisoners of war works well, though quite subtle. Again I wondered about that heavy emphasis on *concoctions* . I take that to be the child's own word or a parental word for what he/she gets up to? Interesting that you don't invoke the fire-power of the forge as an image and I wonder if there's a stronger hint to be gleaned there. The father-figure being a kind of god of fire.

4. The imagery here is quite compelling - the curved mirror of the tin magnifying the agonies inside which are nonetheless aesthetically pleasing to the child. I wasn't sure about 'The struck stick burnt to a claw" - presumably the match, but I could quite see the 'claw' there, so it feels like a slightly false focus - unless I've missed something. The closing image of this section is important, but in terms of the narrative I'm slightly unsure what's happened. 'Plunged the river' doesn't quite seem to mean plunged 'into' the river, in which case we might expect more description of envelopment in water with its baptismal irony. There's a hint that the child is on fire with some kind of elation - the water 'sizzled' by contact - but I think that this needs another look.

5. I have mixed feelings about this section. I think it does need to be short, because you're closing the narrative and joining up quite a few of the themes. Why is the father 'speechless' - does he know what's happened? Is he shocked by the child's interpretation of 'get rid'? This seems important, but it's hard to tell. Why is the child babbling? Is he/she conscience-stricken - again it's hard to tell from what we have here. 'He led you to a scalding bath' suggests retribution and cleansing. 'Soot marked your tide like wing dust' is a great idea, but it isn't quite worked through, I think. It almost suggests that wings-into-dust is the norm, but the soot implies burning, which is murderously abnormal. I think it might need a tweak to develop it, even if it's only a change of syntax: 'The soot of wings marked your tide.' is somehow more explicit. The final line is masterly, I think, and that whitening effect a marvellous closure to the poem, implying the child's attempt to chalk away sin. That's wonderful stuff, the imagery carrying the whole weight of the poem whilst remaining

itself.

So, I'm enthusiastic because this poems yields up more and more as I go through it. It strikes me as fully integrated in the sense that you remain aware throughout of the ironic cross-overs and parallels between the story of the child, the notion of war, and the mythological sense of lost innocence. I wondered at first whether the Vietnam newsreels bracketing the poem was sufficient and whether there ought not to be more of a rhythm between the inner and outer worlds of the poem - the world of the family and garden versus the world of war and newsreels. I think now that you've kept that very well under control and only invoked the war insomuch as it happens as a naturally occurring part of the narrative. In fact, you collapse one experience into the other as well as juxtaposing them at either end of the poem and that carries a real narrative strength into the poem.

I think that this is a real achievement and repays all the work you've put into it. It has a weight of intention behind it that never drags the poem down but that gives it real force. Your language is accurate, powerful, rhythmically poised - and nimble where necessary - and I found very little to quibble at in the technical sense. The narrative is, for the most part, very clear, without being spelled out in a laborious way, so I think that you use the sequential nature of the poem very well. As you say yourself, I'm sure that you've developed your approach a great deal by taking on something as ambitious as this and bringing it off. I've made a few suggestions and raised a few questions which I hope will help the poem settle into its final shape. But it's a sustained piece of writing and a compelling read.

The bad news, of course, is that long poems are very difficult to get published - though this one isn't huge. I think that Envoi still handle long poems. I'm not all that up to date on new magazines - The North, The Rialto and Poetry Wales are worth a go. I'm not sure whether it's worth going for really small ones since no one reads them anyway. Get hold of the MacMillan 'Writer's Handbook' which has quite a lot on poetry now. Your covering letter should be really brief, but you might include fifty words as a 'biographical note' just to whet their appetite.

Give me a call to discuss continuation after this course. Well done!

take care,

Graham Mort

OPEN COLLEGE OF THE ARTS TUTOR REPORT

Example 3

Course Storylines
Student Name 12/1/01
Student Number PH336JZ
Assignment No 6
Next Assignment Due -
Tutor Graham Mort

25.4.00.

Dear

Many thanks for this final assignment on the Storylines course and for all the comments in the assignment commentary. I was very impressed by the press cuttings regarding your play at the Traverse - you must have been very proud and excited by that production. I'm delighted too, that you've managed to complete the course against all the difficulties that you've faced.

I really enjoyed The Charlatan which is a sustained and fully developed piece of work. It's nice to have something that's professionally typed since it's much easier to read and appreciate, so top marks for presentation! I think that a piece that's typed is also much easier to revise in many ways - i.e. easier for the writer to experience as a reader once the work has settled in their minds.

I think that the story is written with great economy and pace and I was interested in your use of what is a theatrical technique - the presentation of the story through a number of 'scenes'. This gives a clear, episodic structure and allows you to move things on very quickly when necessary. I wonder, though, whether some of the scenes could be more clearly demarcated - for instance between paragraphs 4 and 5 on p2 - by typing a short black line to indicate that there's a shift in place and time. Like this:

That just helps the reader to understand that we've moved from one place or time to another. Another way to do it is simply to leave a wider space between the paragraphs,

I think that the shifts in scene work pretty well, except for that particular one on p2, where there's a very abrupt shift from the 'here and now' dialogue between Hector and Davina and the problems of Callum with the fishing trade. There are two problems with this: one is the abrupt movement of the story into the future and another is the sudden change of attitude that Davina experiences. Some more time preparing us for Davina's change of heart by describing Callum's problems might help us to believe in the transition more. Davina is very adamant about her attitude to the seers and that change of heart is a fairly crucial hinge in the story because, presumably, it's linked to her cynical exploitation of the tradition as the story progresses.

After that moment I felt hat the story picked up pace and confidence with a new set of characters being introduced quite deftly. The story is wittily told and you manage to create a very convincing account of how Davina manages to get round her audiences and operate as a con-artist - despite the fact that you've never been to a seance! I thought the way in which Davina worked Mrs. McAskill to milk information from her clients was very cleverly done. I've underlined a couple of superfluous words in pencil, but generally speaking, there's hardly a word out of place and you keep events moving both within and between the scenes.

I liked the way the story accumulates tension too, as we return to the seance and find Davina under increasing pressure from her clients. Despite the pace of the narration there are some beautifully observed moments, like the softening of Callum's hand and that memorable flight of starlings against the sunset. These help to fix characters and places in the reader's mind, but you never allow them to settle too long before moving the events on. The return of Hector gives the story structural unity and I thought that allowing him to play his part at the end was an essential ingredient of your story.

I found the use of characters interesting, especially the contrast between Davina and Hector and Melissa and Ellie. The dialogue is convincing and I like the way that you introduce subtle changes in accent and vocabulary for different characters. So we recognise Hector when he returns as much by his characteristic speech patterns as by anything else. The development of Melissa and Ellie as very different characters adds to the impact of the revelation that they've been misled by the same man when it comes in that final seance.

As I've indicated with Hector, the structure of the story and the deployment of characters are very closely linked in this piece and I wondered about the relationship between Alan and Melissa. When Melissa appears you describe here as the 'girl of his dreams' and yet their relationship never really develops. In fact there's much more interaction between Alan and Ellie, despite the lack of attraction there.

So I think you set up a situation which is not quite convincing or resolved in this present draft. Melissa pretty much has a walk-on part in the story and yet she is apparently the motivating force in Alan's interest in the seances. Ellie asserts herself much more and the effect is that we're not sure where Alan's interest lies at the end. I think that you need to develop Melissa as a character rather more and to give her more to do so that the reader gets to know her and gets to know what she's like as a person. Perhaps it is Melissa who Alan should offer his front-door key to!

I have similar feelings about Hector as a character too in that he gradually diminishes as the story goes on. When we first meet him we sense a strong romantic interest in Melissa, but her never really pursues this. The freelance journalist aspect of his interest in Davina seems less a motivating force (is he writing an article, an exposé?) than the romantic interest he has, but again it never really develops. I was surprised that he befriended Ellie so quickly when his real interest seemed to lie somewhere else.

So the characters of Melissa and Alan could stand a little more development and their interaction could be written more forcefully into the

story. I found it interesting that Callum is such a strong character, despite hardly ever appearing, and I think that's because you give him strong characteristic (adultery) and sharp physical description. Although we get a clear picture of Melissa it's fairly bland and we hardly really see Alan at all as a physical person. I think that a few touches of the brush would just highlight that aspect of the story.

Having said that, this story has all the gentle irony, humour and economy of your best work and I think that I would have identified it as a Marjory C.....r story wherever I'd come across it. There's a characteristic voice at work here and a choice of subject matter which allows you to explore a group of characters with humour and sympathy. Even Davina comes across as a sympathetic and likable character and I think that give the writing a sense of generosity and warmth which contributes to the formation of your voice as a writer. No one quite escapes the force of that irony, yet the reader comes to identify and sympathise with each character. That sense of a recognisable storytelling voice was the first thing I ever noticed about your work and it's the sense that I'm left with now.

I've really enjoyed working with you on the course and I hope you've found my observations useful. I'm not sure whether I told you that I was leaving OCA, but I'm now working as a freelance writer and tutor again. Good luck with your writing in the future and well done in completing the course. I'll let the college know so that they can send out your certificate.

best wishes,

Graham Mort

OPEN COLLEGE OF THE ARTS TUTOR REPORT

Example 4

Course Lifelines
Student Name
Student Number 210501
Assignment No 5
Next Assignment Due 20.1.99.
Tutor Graham Mort

27.11.98

Dear

Many thanks for this fifth assignment and for your accompanying letter. This is a difficult one to tackle and I can see why you had trouble settling on a way of splicing all the stuff you had together and getting it down to a reasonable word-count! I think you've done pretty well.

The piece starts a little uneasily, I think, with you asking a lot of rhetorical questions about how you're going to tackle the exercise. It struck me that nearly all that first page could have gone into your letter to me (the assignment commentary) which would have led to a more decisive opening: 'The photograph shows me as a child of 5/6 years, standing very straight...' In this way the reader is taken straight into the narrative without having to share your anxieties about the approach!

I like the way you engage with the notion of time in the piece, reminding us that at the moment you're standing in the photograph, your husband's family are fleeing Nazi Germany. That creates a sense of simultaneous events and also a sense of tension and converging narrative which knits together the different stories that make up your own life story. The way you move back wards and forwards in time on page two is interesting because it casts strong shadows over your childhood and reminds us of the horrors of the war to come whilst also creating a sense of the cultural inheritance that your husband will bring with him.

Your childhood is described in quite selective and vivid moments - I liked the way the 'lights' make the cat peculiarly frisky! - and those moments are often significant ones which bring a sense of rationing and war. You describe the making of rock buns with liquid paraffin quite matter-of-factly, leaving the reader to connect this up with war-time deprivation. That's a good technique which makes the reader work a little and draws them into the narrative as a result.

In a similar way, the incident where you fall into the tree and have to be examined by a doctor for 'intact virginity' creates an extraordinary sense of the morals and pre-occupations of the time. It brings the sense that a daughter was a precious and marriageable commodity, but also creates an ironic context for the child that comes later when you're in Canada and the secrecy that surrounds it. So again, without hammering home the point, you create a strong sense of social history through personal anecdote.

You move on quite quickly then, though your account is still full of vivid writing which brings a strong sense of the real world - music, food, school experience. The next episode is a fascinating one and I felt in some ways that I'd have liked more here. I'd liked to have had a clearer picture of the wife and her 'frozen shoulder' of the baby who you adored and of the husband who kept you out late at that disastrous tennis match.

This is a very significant moment which shows you caught between childhood and adulthood and I think that it deserves to be presented in much more dramatic detail. I can see why you've skated over it in this assignment, but it ought to take a proper place in the story as a whole. You excited my curiosity and took me into the tension of the situation, but then you pull back and speed up the action, leaving me feeling slightly cheated. Did you feel any attraction towards the husband, had you suspected this might happen, was there any hint of seduction in his manner and how did he react to the accusation and how was that made?.... more please!

Again, the episode with your mother's leucotomy is fairly dramatic stuff and I'd have liked just a bit more detail about why the operation was

necessary. I felt a little confused between the symptoms that had necessitated it and how she was left afterwards. That could easily be clarified and linked to your own therapeutic work.

The impressions of living in your flat and living a hectic social life are nicely drawn and the writing here has real pace and verve I was left wondering what your introduction to the lunatic asylum was like, though, and we sense a great deal has been left out here. It's a good opportunity to develop the sense of a hidden society and an open one, a rather sombre world of illness and the excitement of being young and independent. So you could make much more of those contrasts.

The next section moves along smoothly and swiftly and you deal with the pregnancy of your flat mate very well - though a name might help us to relate to her more closely. Once you're in Canada you hit the home-run and write quite convincingly towards the conclusion, getting in a lot of information but keeping things moving. I thought that the rescue from the wilderness with a holed petrol-tank was a bit abrupt. You describe an approaching car, but not the person who rescues you! I think that moment just needs to be intensified through greater detail.

The contact with your uncle is a fascinating turnaround and, because it refers to the first world war, actually brings in another period of social history to enrich your account. You move into your own pregnancy and that of your daughter with assurance and even bring is an up-to date sense of your adopted son which helps to allay unsatisfied curiosity - not bad in three or four pages!

So, a somewhat jerky and uneasy start, with some sections that beg to be developed further. But its a compelling read - despite some rather faint and untidy typing, which gets better! At your best, you write with real insight and the kind of sensory detail that compels the reader to turn the page, bringing a vivid sense of time and place. As I said, a difficult assignment, because it invites that experimentation with time.

In that respect, I think that the final section is the most successful where you create a number of links - you, your parents, your uncle, your

daughter - so that one experience is reflected through the prism of another. In fact, throughout the piece you show the knack of creating interesting perspectives without ever really forcing the issue and that's the strength of your approach.

I'll look forward to your last and final assignment. Hope these remarks are helpful,

best wishes,

Graham Mort

OPEN COLLEGE OF THE ARTS TUTOR REPORT

Example 5

Course Writing Advanced
Student Name
Student Number 155149
Assignment No 3
Next Assignment Due 3.12.98.
Tutor Graham Mort

1.10.98.

Dear

Thanks for your letter, assignment commentary, poems. I've put the poems from the sequence in the correct order, otherwise I'm in danger of becoming confused about the way in which the reader would happen upon them. I'm also armed with your comments and those in my last report. So here goes.

Red

The first thing I notice here is a narrative style absent in the original poem - 'Blue smudges end the day..' which suggests both space and time quite neatly. I think that this narrative sense is more a case of atmospherics, in the end, since the imagery, rather than the story is what develops. But it does bring the reader into the poem in a more engaging way. I wasn't quite sure about that first line. 'Flesh marks' seems a bit vague and 'taut canvas' a bit overemphatic. It's almost as if you're hinting at 'stretch marks' but can't quite get down to it. You keep the sense of voice going throughout the poem, which is good, offering a personal rather than an abstract account of the spectrum that's unfolding itself. The ending is powerful, though that word 'drooling' is a difficult one in some ways - suggesting an almost degenerate or animalistic passion - but you set up a strong sense of desire, sexuality and (thwarted?) fecundity. The poem is loaded with an obsessive quality, the poet's sensibility translating sunset into an unrequited moment, that sense of the sexual abyss of the night coming on.

Blood Lights

Yes, the emotional turmoil is very strong in this. The imagery is powerful drawing on the image of nuptial sheets, virgin blood and the moon pulling around the menstrual cycle, although invisibly. Like the last poem there's an undercurrent of pregnancy denied (cows bellowing is usually associated with their being in milk and denied the calf), yet the poem is itself pregnant with a pent-up desire. There's a curious commingling of sky and bed imagery too, as if the sky were both the image and the actuality of passion. Some punctuation might help line six - or a new set of line breaks, as suggested. I'm not sure whether or not you should have that final line - the poem seems to find a kind of stasis in the colour blue, but the bloody sky sets it going again. Maybe one poem can stand only so much blood - I felt a bit exsanguinated myself by the end. On the other hand, I can see how you want to keep it going, pulling the reader into the cycle again...

Yellow Fever

Yes, again you use a narrative style to take us through the imagery, so I felt pulled through the poem more forcefully than before. And again, that narrative is somewhat illusory, since you take us *inside* , in many ways, rather than *along.* Just a couple of hesitations on the way: that word 'While' in line two seems unnecessary and 'steep' is implied in 'ravine' I think. I was interested in the way in which a real landscape leads us into to an interior landscape where the physical features are redrawn in a more abstract, emotional, enigmatic and unresolved sense, though the direction of sexual energy seems clear enough. I think it's a better technique than those rather abstract early drafts which started in the interior world without a way in. I loved the image of yellow light on the back of a crow and that final image of the gasping concertina is very disturbing as an emblem of frustration and potential, the music somehow trying to breathe the wrong element.

It's hard to see these without the context of the sequence, but the remarks I've made should reassure you that they're more solid and engaging than I felt they were before. I just wonder where the resolution - if any - of this smouldering and thwarted sexuality lies?

In Your Head

Yes, I liked this one which plays about with the set pieces of common speech. It's interesting how you make a poem without any imagery work, as if the language itself - the subject of the poem - has assumed a concrete quality. Which of course, it has, because language is a real thing and the only way we can really talk about it is by means of itself. It felt pretty nicely balanced to me, that playfulness controlled and nicely undercut by the ending where thoughts, too, become concrete actors in the poem rather than abstract mental wraiths. I think this poem does a lot in an apparently effortless way, focussing on the 'otherness' of others, the way the common ground slips away from us, leaving us somehow alone inside whatever 'mindset' we have. Interesting.

Lies

Yup, there's a poem in here, but I think at the moment that it's got the better of you. The title strikes me as slightly misleading too - I'm not sure it illuminates the poem or creates a context for it, if anything it adds to the slipperiness. You might want that, of course! The opening is simple and strong, though I feel that the rhyme between 'fag' and 'shag' is a bit obvious and clichéd and to some extent obscures the tone - that comic tone doesn't really return, so it seems arbitrary. "Crotch' for 'crutch' might be less ambivalent too - sounds like a you're going in for a prosthesis, as it is.

The poem takes off again in line 9, I think, establishing the sense that we have facets of the same person, which complicates the sense of adultery and betrayal. I think that the cigarette image is responsible for some problems in that it doesn't properly connect the early part of the poem to the marshland imaginings. It just seems like a prop that you could do without, because, without it, you'd have to establish the flow of the poem through the relationship. There are moments of consolidation throughout the poem, especially that final couplet, but I'm not sure that you elaborate the initial sense of duality successfully. Perhaps there's a shorter poem in here which sustains the sense of desire without quite so many backflips - though I'm all for a few moments of verbal athleticism. I think that you need to take a close look at the imagery - coins, birds, marshes, rivers, moon, stain, chocolate etc - and to take the reader through more

coherently. If the underlying nature of the poem is complex and contradictory, then there's an argument for superficial unity, even if its undermined ultimately by the subject matter.

What I Would Give

Well yes, it treads a fine line. I'd give it the benefit of the doubt on sentimentality, because you maintain a fairly cool, even cat-like reserve. Despite the underlying desire, there's a more controlled and less passionate tone. My objection would come from another direction, which is that it lacks development. You open with that statement in the first two lines, but the rest of the poem is really a kind of verbal infill which hardly develops the sense of wanting to be hugged beyond the opening lines. There is the potential to develop the poem, to complicate it through the behaviour of the cat, but you don't really let the ironies chime - the fact that you project a human desire onto a creature notorious for its unscrupulous lack of attachment. I think that a lack of movement is also compounded by a lack of sensory engagement - the meal, the music and the smell of the would-be lover, for instance, are all almost abstract aspects of experience. So a poem which is tactile in intention ends up being a bit distant in execution. In a sense, being direct and heartfelt in the opening lines gives the poem little to achieve afterwards.

Leaftime

This one is almost a haiku in intention. It explores a season in moments of physical intensity and achieves a kind of unified epiphany by the end, that sense of being on the edge of something that's about to happen. There were a couple of moments that bothered me. In line 4, I wasn't sure what you meant by 'snuffing out reflections in the slip stream.' If you mean an actual stream then the pun is a bit confusing (air not water) and it left me struggling a bit. I wasn't sure about 'verdant with rush' either - it suggests rushes, but I guess you mean a kind of chlorophyllic haste. The second instance clarifies it, but then you need to get your clarity in before your reiteration! The two lines just hold up the flow, I think. I'm not sure that the title does enough to convey the underlying emotion of the poem, we may need to feel some tension between title and poem in order to begin to understand that it's more than the sum of its descriptive parts.

Green

Yes, this is strange in content, but your narrative line is clear and direct, so we're able to enter the world of the poem and experience it it more successfully - so, a point I made earlier seems realised here. It's not unlike the previous poem in its structure and procedure, except that here we have an intensification of consciousness, so that what's perceived is also distorted by a powerful underlying drive. So we have the tension between a perfectly innocent scene and the lost innocence of the narrative which exposes an underlying sexuality - and lilies are, of course, sexual organs, though unlike our own in function. The result is a curiously alien and disturbing sense of human sexuality hinted through the language of 'labia' and 'tongues', wetness and appetite. I felt that 'dappled green shade' is a bit clichéd, too self-consciously pastoral for a poem that takes a pastoral convention and turns it upside down. No soothing nature here, but a quagmire which seethes with sexual mendacity and false promise. I think you may mean 'raises' by 'rises'? Re-reading it it's interesting how that cool, reflective opening shades inexorably into a kind of madness as if the imagery is taking over the poem. I wonder if that last line should read:

over the tongues
these lies wrap around.

It's a strange poem alright, but it succeeds in doing what you attempt elsewhere nonetheless. That's to convey *force* of emotion rather than specific emotion; here the sexual thrust of the imagery is unavoidable yet it's as if it doesn't need to be defined or refined, its presence as a disruptive force, a source of disquiet and unrest seems enough to put the reader where the poet is - at the centre of that disquiet.

Well, I enjoyed the range of work here and think that you're right to experiment. I get the sense that some of the work still needs to settle and that you're still working through material at an exuberant stage of development. There's a great deal going on but I wonder to what extent that sense of unrequited passion could be sustained in a collection without a sense of consummation; in places it's almost as if the sexuality of the poems has broken free of a hopeful objective, although that does

create an extraordinary sense of tension too.

I'll look forward to the next lot.

best wishes,

Graham Mort

Appendix 5

Pantoum

Open Your Heart

My heart is a rising and setting sun,
It races, fast as frightened people,
My heart beats like a wooden drum,
It rings in the body's fragile steeple.

It races, fast as frightened people,
Blood is mysterious, hidden inside,
It rings in the body's fragile steeple,
It is black as a blind river's tide.

Blood is mysterious, hidden inside,
My lonely heart hides beneath my breast,
It is black as a blind river's tide,
It thumps like the lid on a treasure chest.

My lonely heart hides beneath my breast,
Slow as clouds drift on a blood hot day,
It thumps like the lid on a treasure chest,
It whispers the secrets I cannot say.

Slow as clouds drift on a blood hot day,
My heart beats softly like a dripping tap,
It whispers the secrets I cannot say,
It is caught like a wild hawk in a trap.

My heart beats softly like a dripping tap,
It's a great fish leaping to the light,
It is caught like a wild hawk in a trap,
My blood is the demon that makes me fight.

It's a great fish leaping to the light,
Voyaging blood fulfils the heart's desire,
My blood is the demon that makes me fight,
Lightning strikes and burns the heart in blazing fire.

Graham Mort with Year 9 pupils of Thomas Hepburn School, Felling, Gateshead.
A Celebratory Arts in Primary Healthcare project. October 1992.

Appendix 6

Academic papers

Messages In Bottles, Graham Mort, Creative Writing Course Director, Open College of the Arts.

Abstract:

Distance learning in Creative Writing Tuition

The poet Paul Celan described his poems as 'messages in bottles', raising important issues about human isolation and communication and about how literature is able to move through time and space to find its readership. Further issues about meaning, intention and understanding are raised by the metaphor and these too find a parallel in an educational process mediated through distance learning. Writing as a creative practitioner and teaching as an educational one creates a continuum between creative and pedagogic expression. In the distance learning context, written feedback on students' work often reflects issues in the tutor's own writing and itself has form and structure just like any work of literature.The reflexive nature of writing and teaching find a correlation in the writing and learning process that a student undergoes. The continuum which exists between the roles of writer, writing tutor and student writer connects closely with the formative process by which writers attempt to move through the arc from creative artist to objective reader in each new piece of work. Central to the understanding and development of these relationships are the critical perspectives created by acts of disclosure through the teaching and learning process; these may be developed from personal disclosure in an educational context to a wider sense of audience and the possibilities of publication. The use of a learning journal produces a text which parallels and comments upon the creative process. This, together with the tutorial report and the emergent creative work form a vibrant 'virtual workshop' and a powerful educational process. These ideas will be presented and explored in the context of the foundation, accreditation and development of the Open College of the Arts writing courses.

Introduction:

The Open College of the Arts is now entering its twelfth year of existence as an independent educational organisation dedicated to providing

access to arts education. In that time it has moved from complete self-governance to a position where it is affiliated to colleges and universities within the public sector and now offers academic credit points on the CATS scheme . OCA has remained in charge of its own economic destiny, whilst also being able to offer recreational, vocational and academic options to its students. This, at time when much greater financial control of education is exerted by central government and a heavy burden of accountability levied, has begun to define its relative independence as a uniquely desirable part of its identity

The purpose of any organisation is perhaps best understood through its actual flight-path rather than than by the rhetoric of its mission statement. In the past twelve years OCA has undergone a number of economic and educational shock-waves and those seismic tremors have tested all aspects of its operation. In some ways not being a revenue client of government or of the Arts Council has created a very direct transmission of cause and effect from the public desire for education to OCA's provision of courses. If they get it seriously wrong, then they quickly go out of business. But such an organisation not only answers the aspirations of individuals in society, it stimulates, defines, shapes and interprets them through the conduit of its artistic and educational enterprise.

The writing courses have been a stable element in OCA from their inception in 1989. They began as a pilot scheme with a few dozen students and now enrol around 500 students each year. At the time of their foundation, provision for study in creative writing in Higher Education was patchy and mainly provided by the post-graduate courses at Lancaster University and the University of East Anglia. In the ten years since OCA launched its first course, provision has burgeoned both at undergraduate and post-graduate level, often facilitated by the introduction of modular degrees, so that creative writing is now part of the greater catholicity of higher education in the UK.

This paper is part of a research project sponsored by the OCA and carried out under the supervision of its creative writing accrediting body, the University of Glamorgan, which now offers an MPhil in writing through

distance learning. Over the next two years it will trace the trajectory of OCA writing courses, creating some perspectives and analysis which can be fed back into the process of course design and distance learning provision. Embedded in the tutorial network and practise of the college is a tremendous body of tacit knowledge, an energy source which it now needs to switch on and draw down through tutorial, communications and design systems towards the student community.

At a recent Yorkshire Arts conference held in Sheffield[167] to launch the Year of the Artist, delegates expressed two overwhelming and contradictory desires, both contained within the notion of 're-integrating' the artist into society. The first was that they be recognised as ordinary human beings, as *workers* in their local communities; the second was that the power of their artistic practise to render them *extraordinary* should also be recognised. With the loss of craft and industrial skills in the post-industrial era it was perceived that the gap between artists and members of the public - audiences, consumers, sceptics - has widened to an unacceptable and unbearable degree. The act of recognition for the artist-as-worker in the community and the belief in the power of art to express and transform our individual and collective humanity lies at the heart of OCA creative writing practise. This study will attempt to describe, interpret and delineate that community of writer-artists.

Background to the Open College of The Arts

The Open College of the Arts was established in 1987 with the aim of offering open entry to education in the practical arts. In its early years the college developed painting, photography, art & design, sculpture and a range of other, mainly visual arts, disciplines. OCA offered distance learning tuition for most of its courses from the outset, as well as face-to-face group tuition. The concept underpinning the college was that well-written course materials created by expert practitioners could offer structured progression and developmental reference points to guide the relationship between students and tutors. The courses would not be a syllabus, but a flexible framework for the creative process in which the tutors, who were themselves practising artists, could play a key role.

167 'Marking The Millennium', Pond's Forge, 14th March,1999.

Like its affiliated partners, the Open University and the National Extension College, OCA has a central office with administrators, but its tutors are scattered throughout the UK, creating a distance management as well as a distance learning network. Courses and tutorials are managed by a course Director who oversees the academic standards and maintains the course materials, and by a Course Officer who works directly with the induction, monitoring and support of tutors. In the case of the writing courses, all tutors are required to be published creative writers with teaching experience. From the course Director to the newest tutor, OCA writing personnel form a community of poets, playwrights, novelists, short-fiction writers and script-writers.

The Arts Council of England:

The Arts Council literature department[168] was approached for grant aid for all the original suite of Level 1 and 2 writing courses and later sponsored courses in autobiographical writing and creative reading. The grant aid was given for two main reasons. Firstly, to give support to an educational programme likely to widen the practise of, audience for, and response to literature. Secondly, to offer support to writers acting as OCA tutors who, it was acknowledged, could now earn some income directly from home rather than by having to travel large distances to educational workshops and other activities.

The Writing Courses and Tutorial Practise

The first creative writing course was conceived as a 'first step' into writing, a general introductory course which would take students through broadly referenced process, touching upon poetry, prose description, characterisation and dialogue as well as tackling wider issues such as language, style and structure. The early assignments on the course (1-4) were quite tightly prescribed but the course progressively allowed students a wider choice of literary form and subject matter. The course was structured as if the student were coming alive through their senses and writing from such direct experience was encouraged through the use of a writer's notebook. The course tried to address writer-to-reader contact through exploring the ways in which we are humanly alive: through spontaneously written observational notes, the evocation of the

168 Then led by Dr. Alistair Niven

physical senses and the shared experiences of the intellect, spirit and imagination. Great emphasis was placed on the process of writing development, on the journey rather than on points of arrival. The exploratory nature of the course, the notion that writing could both express and extend experience, was captured by one student[169] who said; 'I don't know why I'm doing this course, I just want to find out more about myself, about writing and about the world.'

The sending of work to a tutor through the post became the sole tutorial method and it was seen as a formative process by which the tutor moved the work forward. In the act of transmission from writer to reader the tutor acted as a first-stage audience, responding to the fundamental 'readability' of the work as well as addressing more technical aspects of language, form, structure and narrative stance.

'Starting To Write' was based on a practical workshop manual which offered a series of structured exercises leading up to six assignments. The course would take a student six months to complete if they submitted one assignment to their tutor each month. In response to the student's work tutors would send detailed written feedback which aimed to provide positive criticism and guidance within the framework of the course. This report would addressed broad issues of development as well as the actual verbal texture of the writing. Students were encouraged to correspond with their tutors in order to create a dialogue in parallel to the creative work.Essentially, all the processes and forms of communication on the course involved the exchange of writing, from fiction and poetry through to tutorial transactions and the course content.

Level 2 Courses:

As more and more students enrolled for Starting to Write the college had to face the issue of progression.By allowing the students to experiment with literary forms, the structure of Starting to Write contained a diagnostic element and by the end of the course, the free choice of assignments tended to lead students towards either poetry or prose, though a few continued to experiment between those genres.

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[169] Ken Watson, Starting to Write, 1995

It was decided to provide two further writing courses which would not only allow students to progress in a specialised way, but which would take advantage of the expertise of tutors as writers. Courses in poetry (The Experience of Poetry) and in short fiction (Storylines) were commissioned, using tutors from the courses as consultants. The process of drafting these new courses and sending them out to specialists for their opinion redeployed and extended the paradigm of the tutorial process itself.

Both courses shared some common elements, whilst dealing with very different genres. Neither coursebook contained exercises, following the assumption that the students had, by this stage, gained some degree of autonomy. Both began with a short essay offering some historical perspectives on the development of the genre in question, and both offered technical and philosophical perspectives. Extensive reading lists, including contemporary magazines, were included and so were extensive examples of creative work - much of this commissioned from OCA tutors. All contributors were profiled in the appendix so that students could find and read the work of OCA tutors as well as that of other contemporary writers. Students enrolling on these courses would be taught by a specialist writer who had a record of publication as a poet or author of short fiction. So the courses raised the profile of OCA tutors as both writers and specialist tutors. These courses extended six assignments over a nine month period, allowing more time for composition, revision, experimentation and the maturation of drafts.

These second-level courses also contained another element in common: that of 'creative tension'. In the poetry course this took the form of an analysis of the relationship between subject matter and form, whilst on the fiction course the creative work was accompanied by commentaries written by the authors designed to reflect a wide range of practise. In this case, there could be a tension between the author's story and their commentary on it, and between the accounts of the working practises of different writers. The basis for this approach was, again, the growing autonomy of the student. By publishing the kinds of debate that took place inside a writer's head when dealing with new work, it was believed that the student's own inner-deliberations might be stimulated. If Starting

to Write was designed to get students to write in a certain way - primarily 'showing not telling' - then the level two courses were designed to put them on the road of becoming the writers they wanted to become. All forms of commercial genre writing were eschewed in favour of an approach that tried to promote a breadth of 'good writing' through the concept of communicability. What was being said was perhaps less important then what was being heard by the reader, or by the tutor who became a representative, albeit specialised, reader.

Level 3 or 'Advanced' Courses:

Increased enrolment on OCA's level 2 courses led to the need for progression onto a further level of study. The philosophy underlying this development was underpinned by two earlier developments: the raising of the profile of tutors in the tutorial process and the increasing autonomy of students.

A level of study was envisaged where students and tutors would be brought together through a much more considered process. Level 1 & 2 tutors were still identified by the college administration and allocated to students accordingly unless a special request had been made with regard to the sex or cultural background of the tutor. But on the new Advanced course the profiles of tutors would be presented to students as a folio of options and students would choose a tutor whose creative and pedagogic intentions most closely matched their own or seemed to offer the most stimulus.

The structure remained very much the same: seven tutorials were introduced over a 12 month period, but the first tutorial was set aside for correspondence between the tutor and student in which a written 'contract' was agreed. This 'contract' set out the intention of the student at the point of enrolment and formed the framework and reference point for the course. Not only did the Advanced course raise the profile of the tutor as a creative practitioner within the OCA community - through negotiation it created a personal writing programme for the student. Furthermore, it was now possible to offer a more subtle and flexible range of options through this method, allowing students to embark on more extended projects. A typical student enrolling for the Advanced course might have

the ambition to work on a collection of poems or short stories or to start a novel.

Accreditation & Assessment:

The essential structure of the OCA writing courses from levels 1-3 was now established and a criteria-based assessment scheme was developed alongside the structure. Broad criteria were established as follows:

Skills (technical competence)
Knowledge (awareness of styles, conventions, subject matter)
Invention (creative use of language and subject matter)
Judgment (appropriate use and control of language and subject matter)
Empathy (the ability to 'enter into' places, characters and energies)

Those broad criteria were supported by more detailed criteria drawn from the 'aims & outcomes' of each course. The criteria were never used as a prescription for good writing, but provided the framework for assessment. What the assessors were really in search of were the surprises and delights that come with the absorption and control of technique and subject matter.

Built into the assessment process was a minimum three-month period in which students were urged to develop their writing in the light of all they had learned on the course. This meant that earlier, somewhat fragmented efforts at poetry or prose description could develop into more consolidated artistic creations. In simple terms, the assessment process was designed as a formative rather than a terminal aspect of the course.

Accreditation and the Learning Journal:

In 1995 this suite of creative writing courses was successfully submitted to the University of Glamorgan for accreditation and became the first distance learning accredited courses at undergraduate level in the UK. Each module or course was awarded 40 credit points and it was recognised that existing levels of study (1-3) equated to the same levels in higher education. Previous experience of seeking accreditation in the

visual arts subjects had alerted the writing Course Committee to the problems of seeking academic status for what were regarded as 'practical arts courses'. This led to the formalisation of the correspondence between a tutor and student into a learning journal where students were invited to reflect upon their experience of the course, to comment upon their tutor's advice and to focus the tutor's attention on their own concerns. As each level of study finds the student a more autonomous actor, then so the learning journal assumes a greater importance in the tutorial process.

Examination arrangements for OCA writing students already existed before accreditation, but the accreditation process led to some refinements. In order to address issues of 'academic rigour' - i.e. to provide evidence of a critical engagement with the student's own writing, the learning experience and other literature - it was decided that the creative work should be accompanied by a 'reflective account' drawn from the learning journal and taking an overview of the whole course. The account accompanies the folio of creative writing and, though, not marked, helps to establish the intentions of the student and the context for the work. An external examiner[170] was then appointed to sample folios. This led to the completion of a process which interlinked a number of related forms of writing, from the absorption of critical commentary to reflective and expressive forms. The final creative folio can be seen as the 'message', which arrives encapsulated in the, by now, transparent medium of the tutorial and reflective processes.

Feedback

The published or performed writing of OCA tutors is the primary basis for their appointment and only published writers and experienced tutors are employed. New tutors receive copies of tutorial reports from existing tutors in order to establish a common standard and methodology of response. After the new tutor has processed two student assignments for each members of their cell of, say, twenty students, the Course Officer samples their work and gives detailed feedback upon it.

The student engages in both creative and reflective writing thought the

170 Currently Dr. Linden Peach , Loughborough University

mechanism of the course. That writing is itself generated by print-based media in the form of the coursebook which is a synthesis of examples of creative writing and analysis of the writing process. The tutor responds to the student's writing in a tutorial report which has form and structure in relation to the course and in relation to the student's work. That report is driven by the student's creative and reflective writing, but it may equally gain impetus from the tutor's creative writing as they focus and discuss their own concerns through the medium of the student's work.

The Course Officer continues to sample all tutorial comments on an annual basis and organises tutor development events which disseminate good practise through written reports, practical workshops and discussion. An anthology of student work, Crossing The Border, is published on a regular basis and tutors may make reference to work in it as part of their tutorial response, perhaps discussing what other students are trying to achieve through their writing. Crossing The Border widens the act of disclosure from the tutor to a much wider public readership .

So the processes of the course can be seen as essentially reflexive elements that engage students and tutors in a complex network of creation-response-creation. In his discourse on human culture as an aspect of genetic evolution, Edward O. Wilson discusses biological models of behaviour and at one point describes the pheremonal communication within an ant colony as a 'semiotic web'.[171] In many ways this describes the way in which the 'hard-wired' or direct communication between individual tutor and students in OCA is diffused in a much more subtle way to all actors in the network via the discussion and dissemination of good practise. The individual student belongs to the tutor's own tutorial cell and both the tutor and student belong to the wider community of tutors (40) and writing students (500) that exists at any time in the college.

Implications of the Network.

When the Romanian poet Paul Celan[172] described his poems as 'messages in bottles' he was driving at a number of things: that a poem

171 Edward O. Wilson, Consilience, Little Brown and Company, 1998

172 1920 - 1970, quoted from Penguin Modern European Poets series, Ed. A. Alvarez

was a cry for help from the isolated artist to the world, that the poem itself was an artifact capable of autonomous communication, that it arrived without a cultural context, that it was a voyager able to conquer time and space, that it might never be read and, almost by definition, that the recipient of the poem might be unable to decipher or translate it into their own language. At a stroke, or rather at a metaphor, as we might expect, Celan defines both the infinite possibilities and the finite limitations of human language and poetic form. A distance learning course in creative writing also sets out burdened by finite mechanisms but in search of the infinite.

The act of disclosure involved in sending new creative work to a tutor is a defining step in the development of the work and also in the way in which the writer begins to understand it and themselves. As Alberto Manguel[173] puts it:

> Since the earliest vestiges of prehistoric civilisation, human society had tried to overcome the obstacles of geography, the finality of death, the erosion of oblivion. With a single act - the incision of a figure on a clay tablet - that first anonymous writer suddenly succeeded in all these seemingly impossible feats.
>
> But writing is not the only invention that came to life in the instant of that first incision: one other creation took place at that same time. Because the purpose of the act of writing was that the text be rescued - that is to say, read - the incision simultaneously created a reader, a role that came into being before the actual first reader acquired a physical presence. As that first writer dreamed up a new art by making marks on a piece of clay, another art became tacitly apparent, one without which the markings would have been utterly meaningless.
>
> The primordial relationship between writer and reader presents a wonderful paradox: in creating the role of the reader, the writer also decrees the writer's death, since in order to be finished the writer must withdraw, cease to exist. While the writer remains present, the text remains incomplete. Only when the writer relinquishes the text, does the text come into existence. At that point , the existence of the text is a silent existence, silent until the moment in which a reader reads it.'

Manguel succinctly lays bare the fundamentals of the writing/reading process; like Celan he sees the writing as being 'rescued' by the reader. His assumption though, is that writing moves across time and space

173 Alberto Manguel, A History Of Reading, Harper Collins, 1995, p 179.

towards its readership just once. This highlights the unique properties of a distance learning course devoted to writing: unlike a face-to face-course where the writer, in a sense, never withdraws from the work, or remains as an interpreter, the distance learning course accurately invents the isolation of both reader and writer in their respective points on the web of pedagogic and creative exchange.

The writing is drafted, revised, then posted. Both student and tutor await its arrival. For a moment, at least, both actors are isolated from an artifact moving between them through time and space. When the tutor unpacks the writing is comes wrapped in the student's learning journal or reflective writing. When the work is returned to the student it is arrives in the context of a new text - the tutor's response to it. In this sense distance learning can be said to both deploy the isolation that Manguel and Celan identify and to ameliorate it through the process of the 'semiotic web', the human and educational context for the work.

Esther Morgan, a poetry student who went from the OCA Advanced course to the MA at UEA and then became a member of teaching staff there, expresses the sense of the infinite in terms of isolation and welcomes the finite as embodied in the course structure:

I remember vividly with what trepidation I sent off my first assignment for The Experience of Poetry, but I felt hat an important step had been taken in breaking the isolation in which I had been writing. I also hoped the course would provide a disciplined framework - it's so easy to relegate writing to those spare evenings which somehow never materialise!

From the start I found my tutor's comments constructive and encouraging. As well as taking your work seriously the reports are invaluable as a written record to refer back to - something no workshop can provide.'[174]

Esther Morgan's evocation of isolation is one that all writer's feel, but her comments on the accumulation of tutorial reports in the learning journal are revealing too. The journal assembles itself as the course progresses,

logging drafts, tutorial reports,assignment commentaries, intermediate

174 Esther Morgan, OCA student, Creative Writing Prospectus 1998

letters, notes and reviews. When it is completed by a student opting for academic assessment, it gains a revised and fully developed assessment folio. Thus there comes into existence a complete record of the course which can also be seen as a narrative of the creative and pedagogic process. One of the attributes of writing is its permanence, the way in which language finds a relatively incorruptible form. As a consequence, one of the key attributes of distance learning is the laying down of a learning resource in relation to each individual student. Read from end to end, the tutor commentaries in the learning journal form a uniquely focused discourse.

A further feature of the pedagogic/creative exchange, as Manguel predicts, is the invention of all the actors through the writing process:

> Poetry at the Advanced level is a singular enterprise. It is not unlike a secret adventure. To be a scribbler in a garret. A dealer in ideas. To be known and recognised virtually through one's writing alone. To deliver up this unique portrait.'[175]

If writing - the poem, story, novel - invents the reader, then it also projects a sense of the writer, invites the reader's intuition of the authorial persona. In a distance learning context, the tutor and writer never meet in a physical sense. The tutor's sense of the student is established through formal aspects of registration - student profile, introductory letter etc. - and the student's sense of the tutor is brought about through similar formal apparatus. The creative work - the student's and that of the tutor too - establishes a different, more powerful, more elusive persona, an authorial self that carries new messages and elicits new responses. That creative persona of the student is modified by their reflective selves, and the educative persona of the tutor is modified or amplified by the presence of their creative work.

When a tutor takes a short passage of the student's work and re-writes it in the tutorial report as an example of technique or narrative approach, then we can imagine that all four personae merge in the new text. This 'virtual world' of distance learning, with its powerful fictional spells and

controlled elements of disclosure, is often bizarrely exploded when

175 Erica Warburton, OCA student, Creative Writing Prospectus, 1998

students actually meet their tutors on residential course. In its simplest form this might take the form of physical appearance, 'I thought he'd be taller and darker than he is.' But also extends to their creative 'aura', 'I thought he'd be more powerful, brooding, you know, *Celtic*!'[176]

The implications of pedagogic/creative exchange for the tutor are important ones that create a reflexive process between tutelage and their own writing:

Teaching has taught me a lot. It's easy to get stuck into one way of seeing if you work by yourself. Students open my eyes to a wider world of possibilities, and my own poetry has benefited as a result.' [177]

and

'The range of the courses, and of the students I meet doing them, brings me back to basic and important questions about writing again and again, and feeds my curiosity about new styles and new genres. I suspect I give best service to students when we are working on forms of writing that are not my specialism ...or not yet, because privately I want to have tried everything I teach.' [178]

Though OCA courses do not contain a syllabus and move from prescription to informed choice as the student ascends each level of study, we can see that the nature of the pedagogic process, its exchange of creative work and commentary, creates a developmental impetus that reaches from the tutor and the course to the student, then back from the student to the tutor. That natural process of the tutor's reflective or critical response to a student's work is intensified by the act of writing because the written report demands a structure, thought-out response, and because each report has to move the student further along in their creative voyage. As David Almond[179] puts it: ' The powerful central idea of OCA creative writing is that tutors respond *as writers* to another writer's work - and it gets results.'

176 Overheard at an Lumb Bank residential course, October 1999
177 Sybil Ruth, OCA tutor, Creative Writing Prospectus, 1998
178 Philip Gross, OCA Tutor, Creative Writing Prospectus, 1998
179 David Almond, OCA tutor, Creative Writing Prospectus 1998

New Developments:

In 1997 OCA launched a pilot autobiographical writing course , Lifelines[180] . Created on the model of the other writing courses this intensifies the process of writing from personal experience, but also invited student to experiment with fictional techniques and new narrative structures. In many ways the exploration and disclosure of such highly personal material is made possible by the distance between the tutor and student. A new aspect to the special relationship between tutors and their students has begun to be revealed through this course. In the next year it is hoped to analyse the pilot scheme, create a Level 1-3 study pathway and to take the courses forward for accreditation.

A creative reading course Reading Between The Lines[181] is now underway and the first tutorials are being held. Devised as a partner to Starting to Write, the course covers the reading of poetry, short fiction, genre fiction, autobiography, the classic novel and literature in translation. At the heart of the course is an exploration of the reader's contribution to the writer's text and distance learning methods have been taken a step further with live group tuition through telephone conferencing. The course involves writing about books as well as reading them and advocates expressive, rather than formal, reviewing techniques.

Launched in the UK national Year Of Reading, 1998, OCA has deliberately kept the options for accreditation open for this course, moving towards a structure of complementary writing/reading courses with academic credit points attached. This will create a partnership between reading and writing in which the reader is perceived as a significant actor in the process and in which the writer is able to the draw upon creative reading techniques and approaches in order to see their own work through the contribution they must ask a reader to make to it.

Overview:

So why choose distance learning in the first place? Some students are impelled towards distance learning education because of their lack of

[180] Brian Lewis & Reinhi Schullē, Ed. Graham Mort

[181] Rachel van Riel & Olive Fowler, Ed. Graham Mort

mobility: 65% -70% of students enrolling on OCA writing courses are women, often with young children. A small number - around 2% - are registered disabled . A larger number exist who are suffering or recovering from debilitating physical or mental illnesses, though this is only revealed through correspondence with their tutor. For the same reasons of social isolation it has many middle-aged and elderly students and many living in remote geographic regions. An interesting development in this pattern is that OCA writing courses now have a growing number of overseas students - mainly in African, Asia and Europe. This has led to a network of call- and-response that makes it almost as easy for a student in Oslo, Marseilles, Tokyo or Athens to take a course as a student in Keighley or East Grinstead. The essential transaction remains the same, though, in time, exotic postage stamps may be replaced by Email addresses that blur geographic distinctions and shrink distances even further.

To return to Celan's metaphor of rescue: is signing up for a distance learning writing course a cry for help? From feedback sessions with tutors and many hundred of telephone conversations, it is known that many students decide to enrol on a course at a critical time in their lives: this may be a time of mourning after the death of a partner or the anxiety of pregnancy, the void of children leaving home, the onset of early retirement, redundancy or illness. Equally, the desire to take a distance learning course may proceed from a sense of opportunity, perhaps having survived any of a number of traumas, from ME to a messy divorce. When a human being is put under pressure they often turn to our deepest and most humanly defining resource - language. And that instinct for language goes further, the desire to sculpt something memorable, lasting and tangible from their inner anguish. Not all students arrive trembling or traumatised: most fall into the category of always having wanted to write, whilst, increasingly, a new breed of creative writing students keen to pick up credit points or gain access to one of the burgeoning MA courses in creative writing is evident. Many students are in full-time employment and the flexibility of distance learning offers them a chance to study within a structured framework. It's a broad community, the oldest member of which is 96 and the youngest 16. All have one thing in common - the willingness to enter into a creative relationship with a total stranger

through the postal system.

And what of that stranger? Is signing up to tutor on a distance learning writing course also a cry for help? Or at least an attempt to seek identity within the growing community of writer-teachers and their activities? OCA receives many more applications to tutor on courses than it can possibly employ. It currently has a team of 40 tutors and each one of those has around 5 applicants willing to take their place. The pay is neither outrageously high nor unfairly low, but at a recent tutor development meeting all the tutors present confessed to some *ennui* with the business of teaching writing, of being constantly drained by students, but all also said that they'd be very reluctant to give up their OCA work even if they gave up the rest. Their reasons were that, at some invisible depth, distance learning tutoring fed the aquifers of their own writing. Dorothy Nimmo expresses this relationship in an article in the OCA writing journal Crossing The Border:

I found it extremely hard, when I started, to think of myself as a writer. But the workshops taught me that the only qualification I needed was to do it. The OCA course demonstrates this too. If a student sends in an assignment they have asserted their rights, their authority: they have said I am a writer. I have written. It takes a certain amount of courage and self-confidence just to do that. And when the tutor accepts the assignment they are confirming: You are a writer, I am your reader.

I have centred my life on the writing process. I have decided that it's the thing to I do. And as long as I'm communicating in words I don't make much distinction between reacting to what goes on in my own head which will come out as poems, and what goes on in someone else's head from which they write poems I have to understand.

They both - the poems and the assignment work - begin in the same way. Here's this student's work, here's this vague idea at the back of my mind and I have to launch myself at whichever it is without knowing where I am going to land up. So I'm going to need (for both processes) a certain faith in my own creativity. Every time I pick up the latest OCA assignment and every time I start to unravel a new poem, I think, I'm not going to be able to do this, I'm not going to discern what this student means, or how they intend me to read this, or what will be helpful to say, or what needs saying that will lead them to something different. If it's my own work, I'm saying - I'm not going to be able to say this, I don't know what it is I want to say.'[182]

Dorothy Nimmo is engagingly self-deprecating, but she establishes the

182 Dorothy Nimmo, OCA tutor, from My Life As A Writing Person, Crossing The Border 2

continuum from her own first steps into writing to the way in which she guides the first steps of others. Despite the tone of tentative irony there is a clear commitment to the process, a clear understanding of the human need to communicate, a sense that as long as we're talking we're still alive.

The roots of this institutional idealism has its roots in the qualities of individual tutors, but also in the way the relationship between the courses, the students and their tutors was originally conceived - the vision of a *community* of writers, which though not yet fully realised, is now becoming closer to the reality originally envisaged. Very few students who progress onto Level 2 or Advanced courses actually drop out. By that time they have begun to believe in themselves as writers and the relationship with their tutor has developed from tutor-to-student into a writer-to-writer exchange. After twelve years of arts education the first tutors to have been OCA students are now entering the college .The school of writing looks forward to joining that cycle, confirming the profound links that exist between the act of writing and the act of guiding the writing of others as an educational practitioner.

So our message in a bottle is not thrown into a pattern of tidal currents, winds and uncertain natural hazards, but placed inside the more dependable culture of OCA; a response to it is guaranteed and the act of understanding and interpretation safeguarded. The isolation of the individual student is tempered by a sense of inclusiveness in a tribe that places value on both pedagogic process and artistic development, where the student is an actor shaping the pattern of creation-and-response available to them.

The student's engagement with OCA can be seen as a narrative, the disposition of educational components in its guidance systems are foci where metaphor, meaning and realisation are wired into the process, confirming context and conferring progression on the work. The reflexive nature of the process has created a self-assembling educational organism where each actor can be seen as both reader and writer. What kind of poem, we may ask, is OCA? What kind of story? What kind of epic narrative of navigation, discovery and self-knowledge? Furthermore, how

can this narrative be extended and developed so that it engages its actors, its reader-writers, as fully and richly as possible?

Graham Mort, March 1999

Sheffield Hallam University Creative Writing,15.4.2000
Conference Paper

Verbal Engineering: interventions in the creative process

Abstract

With special reference to distance learning, this paper will examine the nature of the transactions passing between creative writing tutors and their students. It will explore how tutors can intervene directly in the learning of students, helping to shape and modify language and literary form by offering alternative drafts in a 'hands-on' process of development.

The components of the distance learning process - learning journals, creative work and tutorial reports - will be examined in the context of the distance learning writing workshop. The nature of the tutorial report as a critical-literary text engaging with both the creative work and contributing to the discourse around it will be discussed.

The paper will look at practical problem-solving and draw examples from the correspondence travelling between tutors and students on Open College of the Arts courses. It will explore the ductile nature of language, taking an approach which engages directly with the student's writing to show how writing and pedagogic technique fuse into a common process, allowing the tutor to demonstrate and develop alternatives to the form taken by the student's initial creative impulse.

Introduction

This paper has grown out of my role in the authorship, development and supervision of the Open College of the Arts[183] open and distance learning creative writing courses from 1989 to 1999. The courses are located at undergraduate levels 1-3, are accredited by the University of Glamorgan and are taught by correspondence methods. The courses cover 'starting to write' (Level 1), autobiographical writing (Level 1, non-accredited) poetry and short fiction (Level 2), and 'Advanced' (Level 3) personal learning programmes. With the exception of those Level 3 programmes, negotiated between the student and tutor, all courses are supported by

[183] Referred to as 'OCA' from now on

negotiated between the student and tutor, all courses are supported by structured course materials which contain writing exercises and examples of literary work.

The courses are taught entirely by distance learning which is mediated through *written* tutorial reports. I draw attention to the convergence of creative and pedagogic media here because the significance of responding to writing in writing is easily lost. In OCA accreditation negotiations, our visual arts students were increasingly asked to produce evidence of the critical/reflective process through written accounts of their learning. This, in turn, involved tutors more and more in written response to what is essentially a visual medium. The process represents an attempted objectification-through-writing and is regarded by many visual arts tutors and academics as irrelevant to learning in a visual medium. I would argue that same tension between creative form and reflection is overcome in creative writing through the use of writing to respond to writing, though there may, of course, be other tensions between the reflective and creative processes.

On each OCA course, the student keeps a learning journal in which are collated all drafts, finished work and correspondence to and from the tutor. This correspondence with the tutor is structured so as to encourage the student to draw attention to the problems that they have encountered, focusing the tutor's attention where the student feels it is most needed. In response to each assignment the tutor returns a report (1500 - 2,000 words) to the student which responds to their reflective writing, pays close attention to their creative work and also addresses more general issues in relation to it. By the end of the process - and all OCA writing courses last between six months and a year and are structured into six tutorials - the learning journal effectively forms a narrative of the course. A 'reflective account' drawn from the learning journal and written up as a free-standing piece of work is a formal requirement of assessment and carries 25% of the marks for the final grade.

In a previous paper[184] I drew attention to the special character of the distance learning tutorial relationship and the way in which student and

[184] 'Messages In Bottles', Sheffield Hallam Conference Proceeding, 1999

tutor can erect fictional persona. The focus there lay in the exploratory nature of the process, the potential 'virtuality' of players, the continuum of pedagogic and creative writing, and the way that tutorial writing helped to focus and develop issues in the tutor's own creative work. This paper is much more of an account of tutorial practice itself, though I think it reinforces those earlier claims and suppositions in an empirical way.

This draws on the experience of tutors (all OCA tutors are published writers who receive training in OCA tutorial methods) and students, who I was able to engage in the debate with some key questions about their experience of teaching and learning through the OCA method. Those questions focused on three main areas of their experience: the learning journal, the tutorial report, and the broader question of the essential nature of tuition mediated entirely through writing. So, in simple terms, questions that focused on course components, on the learning experience and on the particular effectiveness and significance of the process.

No such neat divisions surfaced in the responses of the participants, but their notes and narratives did begin to add up into a picture of a tutorial method with unique properties and possibilities. I hope that this account will show a practical methodology, offer concrete examples of good practice, and explore the special implications of distance learning tutorials in writing.

The Open College of the Arts is an open-learning college and therefore has a very broad constituency of students with a significant drop-out rate - though this is no higher than in other distance learning institutions like the Open University. The remaining group fall into three categories - those interested mainly in recreation and self-discovery, those interested in accumulating credit points through writing, and those interested in writing as artists. Nor are those categories are hermetic or exclusive, but all OCA students have a choice as to whether they take up assessment and apply for academic credit, and this creates an unusually permissive climate.

The examples of tutorial reports here are dawn from my own responses

over the past three years and all students were my own. My reports were monitored on an annual basis, like those of other tutors, so they are representative in terms of standard, form and content. All the students featured here have experience of other forms of creative writing tuition and most have undertaken distance learning writing courses in OCA with other tutors. Some are teachers who themselves now tutor creative writing students, so they form an articulate and thoughtful study group able to extrapolate their own experience into the general principles underlying the process.

Context

Distance learning has a long pedigree in creative writing and, for the distance learning academy, an unfortunate association with snake-oil remedies, wonder-cures and sharp-practise. This dubious reputation stretches back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: that momentous age of mass literacy, steam-driven printing presses, typewriters, locomotives, rapid telegraph and mail services - and self-improvement. Advertisements urging punters to 'Learn to Write In Four Weeks', 'Earn Your Money Back In Six Months', Learn To Write and Sell Your Stories with Professional Tuition', lined up with patent cures for baldness, impotence, memory loss and other ills. Those newspaper advertisements are still a familiar sight and the companies involved offer more or less reputable products, depending on their educational ideals and their commercial base.

The Open University and the National Extension College in academic subjects and OCA in arts education have changed the face of UK distance learning from a potentially dubious shot in the dark to a systematic and accredited option which can bring students into the learning process with no qualifications and send them out with a degree. The IT revolution is speeding up our ability to learn on-line; existing HE institutions are rapidly trying to assimilate distance learning into existing programmes whilst new enterprises like the University for Industry are developing entirely new 'e-learning' programmes in their own right. Distance learning MA's in creative writing have been set up at a number of UK universities, tele-medicine is developing rapidly in the NHS, and it's possible to buy a CD-ROM at any motorway service station which can

deliver a learning programme through the home PC.

Economic expediency may be a crucial factor in the development of the new university courses, but so is a growing recognition that distance learning is now far from a second-best option. With the development of the 'virtual university' comes the celebration of the unique methodologies that distance learning can bring to the learning process. Any educational system will work best when there is a convergence between the knowledge and techniques to be learned and the pedagogic medium itself . Face-to face teaching in creative writing is problematic in a number of ways, especially as the size of tutorial, lecture and seminar groups grows. Students compete for air-time in workshops and tutors are forced to convey ideas and examples through verbal exposition - however inspirational the tutor and however assiduous the student, such methods are prone to opacity. Self-directed learning, such as the CD-ROM materials currently being developed by Sheffield Hallam University involve interaction with a computer programme rather than a tutor, so whilst useful, are also somewhat circumscribed.

Unlike painting, dance, photography or music, creative writing teaching lacks a practical vocabulary. The concepts of literary criticism do not necessarily inform the creative process and even seasoned academics in the field of literature become mere beginners in creative workshops. Language, the most mercurial of media, is notoriously resistant to methodology. Every new piece of writing creates and solves new problems and that is a lesson which every writer has to learn - there are no permanent solutions, no fixed termini, only points of consolidation which lead to new problems and further solutions. Sure, there are formulas for formulaic writing, but our aim in HE is to link self-expression to rigour, spontaneity to reflection, structure to surprise, imitation to originality. Such felicities are easy to recognise, but difficult to bring about or to nurture unless the students' work can somehow be kept in a state of flux throughout the process.

A visual arts tutor takes a student's drawing and re-draws a line, a violin teacher plays back a student's composition with new accents and notes, a photographer scans-in a student's photograph and electronically re-

edits it, a dancer dances the solution to a difficult piece of choreography. In learning in the arts the tutor is able to 'Show not tell', so enacting one of the key concepts in the writing tutor's bag of stock-phrases. All those techniques are transferable to distance learning, but few so seamlessly as writing, where a new kind of clarity is engendered. Distance learning allows a professional practitioner to interact with a student's writing whilst it is still fluid and this process is speeded-up and intensified by the ability to share work in electronic form. That speeding-up is, perhaps, not without its problems, but that is a different story.

Distance Learning

The essential difference between any model of distance learning and face-to face tuition is that the student is not in direct physical contact with the tutor. For the purposes of this paper I wish to set aside the notion of video-conferencing, which, though mediated through distance, is, literally, a face-to-face method. In distance learning it can be argued that one layer of opacity particular to face-to-face contact is stripped away: the transient body-language and inter-personal chemistry that support our verbal utterances but which also imbue them with a degree of ambiguity. Several students commented on this factor in relation to the permanence of the tutorial response in distance learning:

> The great thing about distance learning is that written reports can be read over and over. I have tangible records of tutor responses to my work, so there's no struggling to remember what they've said; I can check my files. They can be re-read and re-interpreted, which is just as well. Some are glowing, but have undercurrents of hard reality which I may not take in until the second time through. Others I crossly stuff back in the envelope and only notice the light praise gleaming through stony words a week later. What I take from the reports is therefore less dependent on mood, personal circumstances and what I remember or record than a face-to-face tutorial[185] .

And:

> I guess the distance learning relationship offers comments that can be taken in time and time again and dwelt on - because they are written rather than ephemeral verbal responses...that is the **key** benefit here - because they are so full and written down you can revisit them in a different state of mind and development and then see and take something different from that experience - I even sometimes review the whole course together, all six units....I could see the pattern of initial encouragement, pushing hard in

[185] OCA Poetry 2 and Advanced poetry student

the middle and then positive reinforcement at the end of the course[186].

And:

I think it probable that the tutor thinks much more carefully about what he/she says since it's not easy to fudge and smooth over utterances in the way that's more possible face-to-face...By their very nature, even if one takes notes, live tutorials are ephemeral...I think interpersonal factors and anxieties, e.g. *Does he/she like me?* and endlessly replaying and interpreting body language and utterances can easily take over from straight hearing of textual feedback. I guess all of this is intensified and skewed even further by imbalances of power between tutor and student[187].

It can be argued then, as one student observed, that 'writing works for writing', that the distance learning relationship overcomes another kind of inter-personal distance, and that, in another student's words, the players are '...freed from face-to-face body language, presences and all the other contact that goes on which can obscure the focus on the work and writing and writer's development'. The tight focus and richness of this writer-to-writer contact is not merely a by-product of the distance learning process, but a direct result of the convergence of pedagogic, reflective and creative media: for writing students sensitised to language and its nuances, this is a significant aspect of the experience.

So, distance learning has the potential to reduce inter-personal distance between tutor and student, allowing them - through the medium of their art form - to participate in an almost seamless tutorial process once the course is under way. This relationship is also incremental: feedback is intensified at strategic points, criticism tempered with encouragement at others, and the whole process written down:

Because the tutor writes about a student's work in some detail the interaction is more intense and more focused than it can be in a workshop with a number of participants. Through that interaction it is possible for the tutor to be instrumental in shaping the student's sense of themself as a writer (for good or ill). The experience can be both more powerful and more controlled than in face-to-face encounters... Even so it removes many of the strains I find in face-to-face teaching. The

[186] OCA Poetry 2 and Advanced poetry student
[187] OCA Poetry 2 student

interaction is circumscribed and focused in a way live tutorials never are and the student's development seems to be more apparent because a concrete record of it exists[188] .

This is not to say that distance learning relationships are always successful in personal terms or an argument against face-to-face contact between student and tutor. But a tutorial process that allies responsiveness to the maintenance of a permanent record is a hugely advantageous one, allowing the students to learn strategically and incrementally and the tutor to teach in the same way.

The learning journal

Learning Journals are now widely used on HE creative writing courses, though they may form little more than a rather self-conscious diary: a formal requirement, rather than a structural necessity, of the course. A diary, in short, that is designed to engage with the self rather than to be read and responded to by a tutor. There is, I would argue, a rhetorical quality to the notion of such learning journals. In distance learning the journal takes on a much more pivotal function: reflection is seen as a process in which the tutor participates directly. It forms the keystone of the personal and professional relationship between tutor and student and contains not only the student's thoughts and reflections but, crucially, the tutor's response to them. The following examples offers a glimpse of this process.

Student:

Well, finally here's the strange brew that has been bred out of the Art & Poetry course and your remit to try narrative. They represent some of the work at least from that course with Carole Satyamurti and Greg Warren Wilson, plus a couple of poems arising from paintings I viewed in addition to those set by the course and a few others that emerged from the same brood of thinking. I think your idea of trying narrative has led me into strange mazes and I'm not sure I've found my way out yet. I felt that the poems were still in flux and I'm not sure if they worked and for a while I wasn't at all sure what they were about - as I have rested them and gone back to them I kept discovering new dimensions of meaning. Today, looking at them again, they felt at least finished for this present time - I think they have gone as far as they could without a long gap now, or sending away to you. I think you are right that I may learn from these but as yet I'm not sure what, and I'm still not certain

[188] OCA writing tutor, fiction and life writing

about many features of them.[189]

Tutor:

Many thanks for this latest assignment and for the very detailed and stimulating assignment commentary. I was interested that you've chosen to base almost all this batch on paintings, since I come fresh from a project in the Walker and Williamson art galleries in Liverpool and Birkenhead. The interest in paintings for me lies in the elements of time and energy they encompass. There's the sense of layers of paint being built up in any painting, the breath of the artist against the canvas as they labour, the gradual coming together of the image. I like the way painters incorporate their mistakes and paint over them and I find the narrative quality in figurative work compelling - the way narratives are compressed and suggested through symbols and signs in the image itself. That, for me, is the clear interface with the enterprise of poetry. [190]

These preambles are taken from a middle point in the course, and one which shows student and tutor engaging very closely in the exchange of ideas about approaches to the writing of poetry, with specific reference to writing stimulated by visual art. There is nothing rhetorical in either passage, they form a direct conduit of communication, response and counter-response in the unfolding of the dialogue. Those general remarks encapsulate the creative work itself and both student and tutor go on to write about each poem in detail, so that the tutor is responding to not only to the poems, but to the student's thoughts and feeling about the poems:

'Dead Fish' (Student):

- seems as good a place to start as any! (oh what an unconscious link was made then...) - this poem - I just love the title - forget the poem - right - ok - grab the poem - it's gone through some eel-like manoeuvres and proved very difficult to put on the page - I have just re-read my first tentative thoughts that I made before trying to tackle this poem and they tell me what I wanted to try and say. I think I have managed to **show** these things and have with drawn a lot of earlier lines and pieces that were me telling me what I really wanted to say. My main concern now is whether it is too allusive for a reader and whether it lets them in sufficiently...[191]

[189] OCA Advanced poetry student
[190] OCA Advanced poetry tutor
[191] OCA Advanced poetry student

'Dead Fish' (Tutor):

I found the narrative thrust of this quite compelling, the way the whole story is mediated through that very vivid evocation of *things* - the eggs and the dead fish with their strange eyes. Sylvia Plath said: 'I love the thingness of things,' and I know what she means. There's something irreducible in their presence and yet they also function as symbols - here the eggs represent the possibility of life, but a thwarted life in the case of the unborn birds. They also represent fragility, I think. The fish is a powerful Christian symbol, loaves and fishes representing the miraculous and in this painting (leaving the poem aside for a second) we sense that the story is all about transformation ....This brings me to the question: how is the poem like a painting? There's a clear connection here with the words being laid on the pages like brushstrokes and the highly visual quality of the narration. The use of frames defines that further, but what is the relationship between the narrator and the image they're creating?[192]

I have deliberately selected these passages because neither student nor tutor yet deals directly with the *language* of the poem. These exchanges, which are leading to the hands-on exploration of technique, wrap the poem in a discourse which is developed continuously around each assignment. There's an urgency evident in the student's writing - note those slips from formal English usage - and to the tutor's response. It's almost a conversational quality, but this time we have a permanent record of the exchange; furthermore, despite the apparent spontaneity, both tutor and student have revised their writing about the poem, so it represents both immediate response and refinement of the original thought.

Interestingly, the exchange stands as a discussion of poetry even without he poem being present. Through the monitoring exercises at OCA we became aware that any set of tutorial responses could be read in this way as a unique and free-standing discourse without the creative work being present. Here's what the same student said to me about this process:

Writing that reflective commentary with each assignment means revisiting the tutor's report and examining it in the light of work produced. That can be very useful and another level of discovery. I only write that final accompanying commentary when I'm ready to send the assignment off - the comments may have been composting and developing but I write it

[192] OCA Advanced poetry tutor

fresh and again a learning process takes place as I write it...It makes me evaluate more carefully as I have to stand back and think what I can write to the tutor. I can and do question how I feel about the work and wonder why and offer some ideas which the tutor can respond to when they see the work. The reply often doesn't match up what I feel about the work and makes me view it differently.[193]

That response is amplified by a tutor who recognises the same process in her feed back:

Obviously one does have to be flexible and often ponder at great length, In order for example, to discover meanings in the text that students haven't recognised for themselves.[194]

This notion of reflection involves taking into account the *intention* of the student, a contentious issue in the realm of literary criticism, where authorial intention may be seen as irrelevant to textual analysis. But the relationship between student and tutor takes place within convergent criteria: those of the course and its learning outcomes, those of the writer's need for self-expression, those of the tutor (related to but not always identical to those of the course), and and those exerted by the writing itself - by what actually happens:

The work of art is a criterion of the artist's intention; it is normally what identifies that intention....Of course the work is not always and necessarily what the artist intended, any more than in other contexts, one always and necessarily achieves what one intends.[195]

This forms part of Best's argument for rationality of response, and for the understanding of art being inseparable from what we call an emotional response to it. He further argues for the underpinning of arts education by the development of such educated feeling, in order to facilitate a depth of response in the audience or reader.

The learning journal essentially enables this process, where criteria embedded in the work of art and the criteria expressed by the writer can be exposed to the consideration of a tutor who bring their own criteria

[193] OCA Advanced poetry student
[194] OCA fiction tutor
[195] Best, David, Feeling & Reason In The Arts, Allen & Unwin, 1985

and invoke those of the course. This aspect of the learning journal can be seen as a kind of refraction - the student sends frequencies of light towards the tutor and those frequencies are absorbed and sent back at a slightly different angle, split apart and re-united to reveal a different spectrum of effects. The notion of distance finds a resonant metaphor in this 'angle of incidence', the gap between intention and effect, because it is in this gap that the possibilities for learning and for change occur.

The Tutorial Report

The use of writing as the common medium of creative expression, reflection and feedback carries a further and very significant possibility forward into the tutorial process. This was focused for me recently at a meeting in which Dr. Stephen Wade (Huddersfield University) somewhat despairingly raised the question of how one deals with student work in a face-to-face situation - i.e. how one finds a practical way to read previously unseen work and to help the student whilst protecting their feelings and making progress possible.

That situation is not only constrained by the exigencies of diplomacy, but by time itself. Once the student's work arrives cold on the page, it's very hard to lift it off again. This is not true of the distance learning process where the student's work arrives encapsulated in an ongoing discussion, both philosophical and practical, and where the tutor has the opportunity not only to formulate a response, but a strategy for development.

In distance learning there is a ductile quality to the student's writing which means that the tutor is able to intervene directly, re-writing key lines or passages in order to suggest alternative drafts. So drafting is not confined to the student alone: it is a shared process. Such drafting can be seen as an extension of reading, a kind of 'kinetic reading' in which the tutor acts out possibilities in the writing, corresponding in many ways to the reader-response theory which says that the reader is the 'maker of meaning' in a text and that meaning is 'no longer and object to be defined, but an effect to be experienced.'[196] But in this case, that 'maker' is also a practising writer with the skills of literary fabrication, a point picked up by one student in relationship to the of writer-to-writer relationship:

[196] The Peripatetic Reader: Wolfgang Iser and the aesthetics of reception, Freund, E, (Ed) The Return of the Reader: Reader Response Criticism, Methuen/Routledge, (1987)

And I guess writers' texts (maybe any artists' shared works) do present a peculiar kind of bridge in this respect...Maybe you get a similar sense to this is you're a fellow engineer and you look at someone else's design, or circuit diagram.[197]

Here are a some of examples of this process taken from a tutor's report:

....You also tend to use different methods of laying out the dialogue, sometimes incorporating it into paragraphs and sometimes laying it out more like a play script. The play script technique is, literally, more dramatic and pulls the speech clear of the action, allowing both to move on quite quickly:

> 'What the fuck are you doing, Gul?'
> The male nurse pulls my head back by the hair.
> 'Get your fucking hand out of your throat!'
> A burning, bleeding gurgle fills me. I keep ramming the inside of my throat with my fingers. Need more time...I struggle free.
> 'Get your fucking fingers out of your mouth!'
> He pushes me forward.
> 'Now!'
> I've got to get it out. He pushes me over.

I think that this might help to consolidate some pages, making the paragraph breaks more logical. It also juxtaposes different kinds of writing in a way which means that the reader can follow interior monologue, narrative and dialogue as separate 'soundtracks'. It also makes it easier for you to work on, I think.[198]

And:

One clue to how you might develop your writing style comes on p6 when you say, 'Eugene and I flew to Naples this evening.' You immediately back-track on this statement by adding, 'It wasn't until a few days ago that I discovered...' and thereafter you write in the past tense about the experience. I wonder if exploring a present-tense narrative might help to give immediacy to the writing and help you to focus on the here-and-now nature of the relationship. The past tense gives you liberty to splice in other information quite easily: ' We intended to rise early the next morning and head south to the Amalfi coast. Living in London, we both wanted peace and quiet. Naples has architectural treasures and is wonderfully situated on the sea, but peaceful and quiet it is not.' But the present tense creates a slightly different pressure to remain within the present moment, I think: 'The next morning we rise early as intended. Living in London, we both want peace and quiet. As we pack, a gecko flickers along the window-ledge above constant traffic. I watch Eugene as he stuffs his shirts into a sports bag. The blond hairs on his arms look like the fine down on a baby's head.' It's just that moment of standing back that helps the reader to

[197] OCA Poetry 2 student
[198] Tutor to OCA fiction student

understand him as a more three-dimensional figure, whereas at the moment he still seems to be a little embedded in the writer's consciousness rather than separated out; there's a sense of mental separation but he's not physically distinct, so our sense of him as an important individual is limited.[199]

And:

The poem builds up sense impressions almost relentlessly with that intensification in stanza three, so that the refrain arriving again is almost a release. That moment in the poem signals a change from past to present tense and I might give that heron a definite article just to make sure the reader crosses over with you - 'that heron' perhaps. The 'hydra-heads' give the following stanza a nightmarish, aqueous quality, which takes us by surprise. Then that sudden shift of attention to your hand and the 'elder jets' (wonder if 'elder-jet' might get the idea of blackness across slightly more directly?). I like the way you drop the refrain here, resisting some kind of naff symmetry, and those final lines seem, to move us much closer to a joined-up sense of things. The 'purple milk' of the elderberries and the sense of them being a bruise in the mouth gives the poem a sense of closure because the bitten fruit is a distillation of sadness and hurt and lost opportunity. So the poem itself becomes concentrated and focused through a transforming image that disturbs us both emotionally and through its unusual and compelling use of language: the kind of synthesis of new sensations and realisations that I talked about earlier.[200]

And:

The last verse of 'Spitzbergen' huffs and puffs uphill a bit, I think. Do we need such a specific time-reference (ok. I know the story) and two lots of whales? Lets make that powerful noun 'splinters' into a verb:

> The bones of whalers splinter
> through the ground.
> Beside the blubber ovens a skull
> still looks out.
> That exposes 'ground' as weak. So:
> The bones of whalers splinter
> through permafrost; beside the
> blubber ovens a skull
> still stares from its look-out.

or you could do a million other things with it. That reinforces another general point too - when you're getting wordy, get hold of the verbs and nouns and see what they can do for you if you swap them about and ask more of them.[201]

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[199] Tutor to OCA life-writing student
[200] Tutor to OCA Advanced poetry student
[201] Tutor to OCA Poetry 2 student

And finally:

I really like the movement in this poem, the way you create a sense of space and positional relationships in the landscape. The focus on each moment of perception remains very tight and the language is held to its task without strain or affectation. There's a lovely movement too from oppression (the distant rain) to a kind of visionary liberation. It's very unforced but the reader feels a relationship working beneath the poem; a relationship that has moved on from some constriction towards a kind of sharing. The gift of the shell seems a catalyst for a sudden sense of hope in the future. It's funny how a mouthful of a word like 'opalescent' just sounds so lovely. I hesitated a couple of times on the way through and I wonder if the first stanza could be pared little to draw less obvious attention to the simile:

> Behind us, a headache
> weight of distant rain
> presses the mountains.

I was slightly hesitant over the word 'presented' in stanza 3 too. I know its a deliberate use of the idea of a display case, but that comes clear in the final line. It might be worth searching out a more arresting verb there. Do you need to follow 'cumulus' with clouds? Why not:

> Fat cumulus, gilt-edged
> rays of sun....

I think a little paring might actually burnish the poem and create those spaces for the reader to inhabit.[202]

Re-reading these tutorial reports now, I'm struck by my own desire to re-work and qualify my comments, even in the absence of the original writing and, I think, this shows that the tutorial process itself is essentially fluid, attempting to develop the writing through hands-on re-working of lines and passages. The student presents problems to the tutor, but the tutor's solution and responses are embedded in their own work as writers rather than in a body of *de facto* knowledge which they must transmit to the student.

The discursive style on the earlier extracts is carried over into the main body of the tutorial reports, so that the ideas are connected up through the examples of the student's writing. In order to form a coherent report that can become more than a set of jotted notes, examples of the student's work have to be imported (a process made much easier by e-mail rather than hard-copy exchange) into the tutorial report as reference

[202] Tutor to OCA Advanced poetry student

points. So the tutor's discourse is acted out around examples of the student's work and sometimes also set beside that of other writers. This takes potentially rather abstract ideas such as the effect of punctuation in dialogue, the use of metaphor, the transitions of tense or the effects of line-endings in a poem and gives them an absolutely concrete referent within the student's endeavour to create a poem, story, novel.

The second main use of this technique - to demonstrate alternatives - violates one of the key taboos of tutorial practise, which is to regard the student's work as a kind of sanctified text which must not be interfered with. One root of this attitude is good teaching practise - respect for the student's endeavour - but the other is our western consciousness of the artist as an inspired and inviolate *individual.* But good writing teaching is all about meltdown - keeping the text fluid for as long as possible and, at the point of delivery, in recognising and anticipating the role of the reader in imaginatively re-constructing the text. The writer is, implicitly, in partnership with an unknown reader. Because the tutor is an active, known and responsive reader who can use their own experience (as a writer *and* reader) to gauge the texture and content of the writing, then the student writer is able to develop their work towards its final audience with more confidence.

Distance learning students themselves recognise the value of this hands-on re-tooling of the text:

With any creative work there's a point where I can't see clearly any more. Leaving it unseen for a week or so helps, but at a certain point it needs fresh eyes, or an audience to catch the nuances I've missed or didn't intend. Redrafting by the tutor gives a poem a kick over the hump where it has stuck.[203]

And:

Hands on re-drafting - that is interesting - it will instil a doubt and make me look at something again. It often links with a tiny feeling that I might be having but ignoring and that is useful. You listen when the tutor expresses that feeling in a hands on approach - I've always found the on-draft of rewriting of phrases helpful and intriguing. I may not always agree straight away - rarely never . I often come round, but I am also aware that my own instinct has to be followed as well, so I wouldn't just accept something. It raises

[203] OCA Advanced poetry student

questions, forces me to justify and re-asses, which is healthy and part of the learning process.[204]

And:

I think for me,. this has been the most beneficial intervention. Perhaps the crucial thing has been the specific reworking of examples because these help me to really see and hear alternatives and set me thinking again/afresh - no mean achievement on some pieces of work that I've thought 'set' or finished. I don't always agree with alteration, but usually there's the excitement of thinking, 'Yes, why couldn't it see or hear that. it's so much better?' I hope I'm learning to anticipate some of these points for myself and can ride a bit further and faster without stabilisers. It's so much more powerful then generalised or bland advice that's hard to apply.[205]

Far from insisting on the sanctity of their work, students recognise the contribution of the tutor as a practising artist as a pivotal once that can set their work on a new trajectory or adjust its existing flight-path. .

Conclusions

The notion of distance learning as necessary to the new learning environments, though somehow second-best, can be conclusively overthrown in the creative writing context. Distance learning creative writing tuition able to promulgate a 'live' writing workshop through correspondence and e-mail exchange. It can can address core issues in the educational process and embed them in a written transaction which has both spontaneous and formal elements The two-way transmission of ideas through writing is able to create a practical process of intervention and to encapsulate it in meaningful discourse to which both student and tutor contribute and which provokes further creative and reflective writing. Each fully-collated learning journal forms a folio of original writing plus the record of a unique research project which creates a synthesis of creative impulse, drafting, reflection and critical perspective, enriching the intellectual content of the course through its very process. The idea of literal distance is challenged by this process and by aspects of the IT revolution: in this context, no two people need be further away from each other than their e-mail address books.

[204] OCA Advanced poetry student
[205] OCA Poetry 2 student

I argued earlier that the concept of distance itself needs to be redefined to acknowledge only the gap between tutor and student as individuals at respective points in the learning process. That gap can be bridged spectacularly through the intensity and intimacy of the distance learning relationship:

One of the things I find strange when tutoring is the extent to which I temporarily feel as thought I *am* the student. Part of me is still the (detached) tutor, but in order to help a student develop the piece of writing further, I have to make myself inhabit the piece and believe it's mine. In offering solutions to the student, I then feel free to propose radical solutions - in a way that I wouldn't dare to, if I'd kept the piece at arms length. I feel this blurring of boundaries much more strongly when engaged in OCA (distance learning work) than in the face-to-face teaching I do.[206]

This comment resonates with Wolfgang Iser's observation:[207]

...It follows that the work itself must be though of as a consciousness, because only in this way is there an adequate basis for the author-reader relationship - a relationship that can only come about through the negation of the author's own life-story and the reader's own disposition.

Following on from that comes his statement that, 'Without an act of recreation the object is not perceived as a work of art.' So, in this context, distance learning tuition can be understood as the sum of the integration of tutor-student/ reader-writer consciousness, rather than a reduction in consciousness caused by lack of direct inter-personal contact.

Many aspects of the work presented in this paper would not always be identifiable in such developed form - at HE entry-level, for instance - and, clearly, distance learning suits the predispositions and personal circumstances of some students far better than others. There seems little doubt that forms of distance learning will play a continuing part in 'lifelong learning' with many mature students working from home and fitting education around personal and professional commitments. Aspects of

[206] OCA poetry tutor
[207] The reading process; a phenomenological approach. Lodge, D Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader, Longman, (1988)

the interchange that I've described above also form part of the face-to-face relationship in creative writing education, and I'm not arguing for the pitching of one teaching method above another. But 'distance learning' or 'e-learning' or 'self-directed learning' or whatever we wish to call it will inevitably form part of increasingly diverse provision in creative writing tuition as well as in other areas of education. The distance learning model in its most developed form offers an intensification of certain aspects of the relationship between a writing tutor and student and those aspects gain a particular resonance from the written nature of the interchange, so that tutor and student, reader and writer, are linked in an intimate and reflexive process capable of producing a very high standard of student work.

Nor am I necessarily arguing for distance learning in isolation, since all academic programmes vary in their content and emphasis, but as a key practical component in an integrated programme of learning which might also contain lectures, seminars and tutorials. Distance as we once understood it has evaporated in the heat of the IT revolution. What we once thought of as here as spatial, then temporal distance, becomes merely the distance between key-strokes. The actual distance we need to bridge is the distance or *difference in consciousness* between individuals - the distance between writer and reader, student and tutor. The process of learning implies the reduction of that distance and, in creative writing tuition, distance learning methods provide such a process - practical, accessible, and employing both the educational judgement and the hands-on creativity of a professional tutor.

There are interesting implications here for hybrid courses which link face-to-face contact with distance learning, or e-learning elements. When OCA collaborated with the Arvon Foundation in their 2000 programme to pilot a course which offered a correspondence distance learning tutorial in advance of a face-to-face course, demand for places exceeded availability three times over. The development of the e-university is also throwing up interesting questions about the interface of technology and the role of teaching staff:

...We do not want to build a virtual university. Cardinal Newman introduced this term as a

pejorative for universities that did not know their students as individuals. The e-university will have to use approaches such as individual learner logs and online human tutors to ensure it meets Newman's idea of a real university.[208]

The idea that technology will replace human interaction is predicated on the notion of downloadable bytes of knowledge, of interaction with programmes rather than people. However, for the process of learning in creative writing, information-technology promises a closer and more immediate interface, offering the extension of a well-founded pedagogic methodology. In future this could link downloadable interactive resources to an on-line learning journal and direct feedback from a tutor, whilst extending the notion of the creative text itself.

Graham Mort, April 2000

[208] O'Shea, Tim, Future Honours, Guardian Newspaper, 18.4.00.

Appendix 7

OCA Accreditation Transfer Document

Open College of the Arts

Submission of OCA study modules

to

The University of Glamorgan

School of Humanities & Social Sciences

March, 2000

Covering Paper

Context & Objectives

The OCA modules listed on the APC form presented with this submission have been previously accredited by Thames Valley University. For a variety of reasons the OCA academic team, backed by the trustees, have decided to explore alternatives to renewing accreditation with them. OCA is therefore seeking to consolidate its accredited provision with the University of Glamorgan.

TVU have not sought the same quality assurance procedures from OCA as the University of Glamorgan has in relation to the OCA courses it already accredits, and we are aware that we will need to bring our quality assurance procedures up to the same standards across all courses. The planning for that is now in place and the procedures are currently being introduced.

The objectives of the current exercise are as follows:

- To obtain a period of credit 'amnesty' where the University of Glamorgan is prepared to extend accreditation to OCA modules formerly accredited by TVU. This will allow OCA to continue to offer credit in the short term.

- To discuss the award of an OCA Certificate of Higher Education for students who have accumulated 120 Level 1 credits or more.

- For OCA to present assurances that its current academic management, quality control systems and examination procedures adequately underwrite such an undertaking from the University of Glamorgan.

- To discuss a re-accreditation schedule within the amnesty period which will allow OCA to bring each accredited module within the requirements of the University of Glamorgan.

- To discuss how OCA will meet the requirements of Recognised Teacher Status in the context of its diverse constituency of tutors.

- To establish the basis of continued academic representation at the University of Glamorgan in order to extend OCA's accredited provision within a developing relationship.

- To discuss the fiscal framework of this relationship.

OCA Credit Bearing Courses

Level 1:

Painting 1: 40 points
Textiles 1: 40 points
Sculpture 1: 40 points
Music 1: 40 points
Garden Design 1: 40 points
Art of Photography: 40 points
Interior Design: 40 points
Understanding Western Art: 40 points
Starting to Write: 40 points
Drawing + Drawing in Colour: 20 points

Level 2:

Painting 2: 60 points
Textiles 2: 60 points
Garden Design 2: 60 points
Experience of Poetry: 40 points
Storylines: 40 points
Painting 3: 60 points

Level 3:

Advanced Writing: 40 points

Submitted for accreditation 1999:

Sculpture 2
Music 2
Painting 4

OCA SCHOOLS AND MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE
+ 1998/9 Enrolment Figures

Director

Director of Studies

Academic Committee

Schools

Course Committees

Creative Writing & Reading
Course Leader (Writing & Reading)
Assessment Officer
Course Committee
592 students

Photography & Video
Course Leader (Photography & Video)
Assessment Officer
Course Committee
172 students

Interior & Garden Design
Course Leader (Garden Design)
Course Committee
314 students

Performing Arts
Course Leader (Music Composition)
Course Committee
175 students

Visual Arts
Course Leader (Painting)
Course Officer (Textiles)
Course Officer (Sculpture, Understanding Art, Calligraphy)
Course Committee
1,893 students

OCA Academic Structure, Management & Personnel

The Open College of the Arts, which is a charitable educational trust, is an independent open and distance learning college dedicated to providing arts education to as wide a cross-section of the population as possible. The curriculum of the college is organised through 5 schools which are shown in the accompanying diagram (page 4).

A Board of Trustees has ultimate responsibility for the college and appoints a Chair of Trustees, a Director who is also Company Secretary and a Treasurer (who is a qualified accountant). The Director currently appoints a Director of Operations to provide administrative support and a Director of Studies to be responsible for academic matters. The Academic Committee is chaired by a retired OCA executive (former Principal of a major arts college) and has the particular remit of overseeing the quality of course development and delivery.

Each school of the college has a Course Leader responsible for the curriculum and for tutors. The Course Leader chairs a Course Committee which oversees academic affairs in each school. Where it's not possible to appoint a Course Leader to each discrete area of activity, a Course Officer is appointed or representation is sought via the Course Committee. Course Committees report directly to the Academic Committee.

The Director, Director of Operations and Director of Studies are full-time members of staff, the Chair of Trustees and Chair of Academic Committee hold honorary positions, all Course Leaders, Tutorial Delivery Officers and Course Officers are part-time staff contributing 25 - 100 days per year, depending on the number of students and tutors they control. All tutors are part-time staff.

The academic practices of the college are written into the OCA Codes of Practice, which are enclosed, and to which this paper will make reference as appropriate.

Senior Personnel:

Chair of Trustees	Professor Naomi Sargent
Chair of Academic Committee	Ian Simpson*
Trustee Representative	Richard Robbins*
Director	Roger Head*
Director of Operations	Judith Jones
Director of Studies	Graham Mort*

Course Leaders (fractional posts):

Writing & Reading:	Alicia
Stubbersfield*	
Visual Arts	Stephen Taylor*
Photography & Video	Derrick Preston*
Performing Arts	Alan Beal*
Garden/Interior Design	Peter Boswell*

Course Officers (fractional posts)

Textiles	Pat Moloney
Understanding Art, Sculpture,Calligraphy	Brian Lewis*

Tutorial Delivery Officers (fractional posts)

England	Brian Lewis*
Scotland, N. England	Jacqueline Watt

* Member Academic Committee
See CV's enclosed

Tutors & Tutor Support:

OCA has a very diverse constituency of part-time tutors who teach a variety of delivery methods. They are appointed by Course Leaders or Course Officers who thereafter supervise their work and a Code of Practice governs their appointment, induction, monitoring and further training.

All OCA tutors are registered on the college's national data-base. Work at tutorial centres is supervised by the Tutorial Delivery Officers.

More information about OCA tutors and tutorial practice appears in the Tutor Handbook.

Teaching and Learning

All OCA courses are based on a coursebook written by a specialist and supported by accompanying texts or learning support materials. The coursebook contains information about the course content and the method of tuition.

There are three main methods of tuition: distance learning, direct tuition in a group, or direct tuition on an individual basis. The student's learning time is thus divided between contact with a tutor and self-directed home-study.

As well as asking for direct evidence of creative work, each course requires evidence of the reflective process which can be shown in the form of a learning journal or log-book, depending on the course in question.

Full details of the general and specific requirements for each course appear in the Student Handbook.

Assessment:

OCA assessment is offered at fixed points throughout the year and is conducted on a postal basis or through assessment events at which examiners meet to discuss the work.

OCA students can opt for assessment at any point in the course and many more students opt for assessment than actually convert to credit points. This makes it very difficult to offer accurate projections as to how many students will actually apply to the University of Glamorgan through any new accreditation arrangements.

Assessors are appointed from within OCA's group of specialist tutors and external examiners are appointed for each course. All assessment grades are ratified by the Director of Studies and monitored by the Academic Committee to ensure a proper distribution of grades.

Each course has an Assessment Officer and, under the recently adopted Codes of Practice, both the External Examiner and the Assessment Officer will submit an annual report to the Academic Committee which is also disseminated to the appropriate tutors.

OCA employs a criterion-based system of assessment. Further details appear in the Codes of Practice governing assessment and the appointment of both Internal Assessors and External Examiners. Details of the assessment procedures for each course appear in the Student Handbook and an analysis of OCA's accredited courses appears on p2 of this document.

External Examiners & Internal Assessors:

Painting & Drawing	Robin Hazelwood (external) Jim Cowan Jacqueline Watt Stephen Taylor*
Sculpture	Robin Hazelwood (external) Ian Bell

Textiles	Robin Hazelwood (external) Jacqueline Jeynes Ann Brook
Music	David Street (external) Alan Beal* Ralph Bateman
Garden Design	Paul Edwards (external) Jaen Webb Claire McCormack Peter Boswell*
Interior Design	Paul Edwards (external) Eleni Tracada Bob Peacock
Photography	Alex Morrison (external) Kel Portman* Derrick Preston
Understanding Art	Mary Stewart (external) Sylvia Middleton Jacqueline Jeynes
Writing (external)	Dr. Linden Peach John Cassidy* Ailsa Cox

* Coordinating Assessment Officers
See CV's enclosed

Current relationship with the University of Glamorgan

The OCA's creative writing courses, Levels 1-3 are accredited by the University of Glamorgan. These courses represent the most complete model of accreditation in OCA and therefore present a very useful model of course development and good managerial practice in relation to the courses presented here.

The outgoing Director of Studies for OCA, Graham Mort, former creative writing Course Leader is currently engaged in research on the University of Glamorgan's MPhil/PhD by portfolio programme. That research

focuses on the nature of distance learning in the college and has involved both tutors and students in developing its central thesis. Some of the papers forming the portfolio have been presented at academic conferences in order to raise the profile of OCA's accredited distance and open learning provision.

This research and its conclusions may prove valuable in the wider context of OCA tuition, helping to identify its unique contribution to arts education.

Annual Monitoring Exercise

As outlined above, the OCA creative writing courses are currently accredited by the University of Glamorgan and each year we submit an Annual Monitoring Exercise to the Registry. This includes details of academic governance in the school, tutor support activities, examiner's reports, student feedback questionnaires and proposed changes to courses or assessment practices.

Thames Valley University have required no similar monitoring exercise from OCA, but we anticipate that, under any new arrangements with the University of Glamorgan, the Annual Monitoring Exercise for the writing courses will form a model for the four newly accredited schools.

Recognised Teacher Status

OCA has over 300 part-time tutors teaching on its programmes. The Recognised Teacher Status exercise therefore presents us with a considerable problem in the short term.

However, a proposal has now been made to identity a cohort of 'academic' tutors in each school from the national registry of tutors. These could take on students opting for assessment and help them to assemble their examination folio, enhancing the academic process and extending the learning potential of the course.

This would effectively identify tutors for the RTS exercise whilst allowing OCA to offer focused training and development for a core of tutors which could then be disseminated to the main tutor body.

The Director of Studies is currently writing a paper developing this proposal which will be presented to OCA's Academic Committee at their next meeting on March 16th. If approved, that draft paper could then be made available to University of Glamorgan personnel for discussion.

Graham Mort, Director of Studies, February 2000

Appendix 8

OCA Advanced student, sample study contracts

OCA ADVANCED LEVEL WRITING COURSE OUTLINE -
Example 1

Student Name:
Student No: 290261
Literary Form: Prose
Date: 8.2.99.

OUTLINE

To use the six assignments on the course as a means of creating a folio of publishable work, working within a flexible framework which allows the direction of the writing to remain open through negotiation with the tutors. To work with two tutors - Graham Mort and David Almond - who will jointly support the project.

To develop an existing body of work - 'Asylum' - which will deal with the author's own experience of the UK mental health system as a patient at St. Andrew's clinic. The account will be written in the first-person, using a range of narrative techniques including exterior dialogue and internal dialogue in order to explore the thoughts, actions and emotions of the central character.

The account will be essentially factual, faithful to the truth as the author sees it, but edited to convey a vivid first-hand account of characters, places, institutions and events and structured so as to create perspectives on the thoughts, feelings and motivation of the central character. The aim is be to achieve a raw and visceral account of events and relationships whilst also provoking a level of understanding which allows the reader to share, experience and reflect upon them for themselves.

The style of the writing will be pacey and immediate, whilst deliberately avoiding a sentimental or avidly sympathetic viewpoint; it will, above all, create a *readable* narrative and give events a powerful impact in the reader's consciousness. As well as creating an engaging first-hand account of one person's journey from illness towards health, the work will be a critique of the UK mental health system from within, so giving a voice to a community which is often, by definition, unable to articulate fully or to

engage with a readership.

Tutor's Signature:

Student's Signature:

One copy to be retained in student's Leaning Journal, one by tutor

OCA ADVANCED LEVEL WRITING COURSE OUTLINE -
Example 2

Student Name:
Student No: 60524
Literary Form: Poetry
Date: 7.1.98.

OUTLINE

To use the six assignments on the course as a means of creating a folio of publishable work.

To work within a flexible framework which allows the direction of the writing to remain open through negotiation with the tutor.

To explore a range of literary forms including more formal technical aspects of poetry.

To expand and develop the body of work already established through previous courses.

To develop an increasingly objectified sense of the poetry written - and of the creative process - through reflective writing in the Learning Journal.

To develop personal material into writing which engages with its public readership in a meaningful way.

To develop a distinctive poetic voice.

To develop poetry which explores a sense of place and which probes at the parameters of human existence and experience.

Tutor's Signature:

Student's Signature:

One copy to be retained in student's Leaning Journal, one by tutor

Appendix 9

OCA Assessment Guidelines, Student Handbook 1999

ABOUT YOUR OWN COURSE

In this section, we give you details of the aims, outcomes and content of courses in writing, as well as what work you will have to submit if you opt for formal assessment. This information will help you get the most out of your course.

Starting to Write - Level 1

This is a 9-12 month course with tuition by post from your personal tutor, to whom you send six assignments.

Basic techniques in a number of literary forms are introduced, together with methods of information gathering, note-taking and recording. The course offers help on getting started with each piece of writing and ideas on the development of work.

The course aims for you to:

- learn how to write from direct experience and develop that experience through the imagination
- consider in depth subjects on which to write
- understand language and style and make discerning choices about usage
- build confidence in writing in prose, poetry and dialogue
- analyse with confidence the structure and significance of your work
- develop a discerning attitude to the work of other writers

At the end of Starting to Write, you could expect to:

- work from initial note-taking through to the production of properly set out manuscripts of poems, stories or plays
- work in a variety of literary forms: poetry, prose, plays
- use an interesting and appropriate range of language
- write entertainingly on your chosen subject
- employ literary devices such as imagery and metaphor creatively
- be able to convey a vivid sense of place and time
- write about characters, conveying inner thoughts and feelings as well as external appearance
- create convincing dialogue which helps to develop the writing in which it occurs and achieve an effective balance between dialogue and narrative
- have a grasp of the art of story-telling with well-developed narrative skills and a strong sense of form
- take serious or emotive issues into your work and control them
- have maintained a Learning Journal.

Work done on this course can be assessed for the OCA Award. For the criteria by which work is assessed and for information on what to send for assessment, see below.

Lifelines

This is a 9-12 month course with tuition by post from your personal tutor, to whom you send six assignments.

This course is open to those who have successfully completed *Starting To Write.* It aims to help those interested in autobiographical writing to accumulate material from a wide diversity of sources and then to put that material together in satisfying ways. The course will help you if you are thinking of writing your autobiography, or the biography of someone else, but you do not have to feel that the end product has to be a book.

The course covers:
- identifying key points in your experience
- exploring narrative techniques through writing exercises
- creating and collating pieces of autobiographical writing
- developing awareness of your place in contemporary society
- becoming familiar with the distinctive genre of autobiography
- testing different ways of structuring writing
- creating a varied portfolio of autobiographical writing.

Further details of assessment procedures will be provided on request - please contact Student Services at OCA.

Writing - Level 2 : The Experience of Poetry

This is a 9-12 month course with tuition by post from your personal tutor, to whom you send six assignments.

This second-level course aims to help students who wish to concentrate on writing poetry to extend their knowledge and understanding of the form. This broader understanding should act as a stimulus to the writing of poetry in a wide range of forms and on a wide range of subjects. The course book functions more as a practical and philosophical stimulus than as a recipe book.You will be regularly encouraged to evaluate the relationship between form and subject.

At the end of the course you could expect to have:

- a growing awareness of the variety of poetry in Britain both historical and contemporary
- explored what poetry is and how it works
- continually explored the relationship in poetry between form and subject
- completed a number of assignments in different forms
- gained in self-reliance and commitment to poetry
- maintained a Learning Journal

Work done on this course can be assessed for the OCA Award. For the criteria by which work is assessed and for information on what to send for assessment, see below.

Writing - Level 2 : Storylines

This is a 9-12 month course with tuition by post from your personal tutor, to whom you send six assignments.

This second-level course in short fiction builds on work done in 'Starting to Write'. It aims to develop writing techniques in a practical manner. The course book contains examples of contemporary writing, and introduces students to the general literature, drafting, development, structure and many other aspects of short fiction.You devise your own assignments based on the many examples and narrative techniques outlined in the course book.

At the end of the course you could expect to have:

- an awareness of the development of the modern short story
- explored the special nature of short fiction
- explored the relation between narrative technique and subject matter
- the capability of redrafting work in a positive manner
- completed a portfolio of assignments which experiment with different technique
- gained in confidence in writing prose fiction and in structuring work into artistic form
- maintained a Learning Journal.

Work done on this course can be assessed for the OCA Award. For the criteria by which work is assessed and for information on what to send for assessment, see below.

Writing - Level 3: Advanced

Writing: Advanced is a third-level course for students wishing to work with a selected tutor on an individually tailored programme.

By the end of the course you can be expected to have:

- developed all second-level writing objectives and your experience of them to a greater depth
- designed and implemented a personal writing programme in close collaboration with your tutor
- extended your use and knowledge of writing techniques in a specialist area
- significantly developed your awareness of the literary form in which you are writing
- maintained a Learning Journal.

Work done on this course can be assessed for the OCA Award. For the criteria by which work is assessed and for information on what to send for assessment, see below.

The following criteria will be taken into consideration by assessors:

- **Skills** (technical competence)
- **Knowledge** (awareness of styles, conventions, subject matter)
- **Invention** (creative use of language and subject matter)
- **Judgement** (appropriate use and control of language and subject matter)
- **Empathy** (the ability to 'enter into' places, characters and energies)

Grade D shows a basic level of competence and awareness, together with the beginnings of a personal style with minimum use of clichéd characterisation and hackneyed expressions.

Grade C shows a good level of basic competence allied to the development of a personal style and artistic awareness of a range of writing techniques.

Grade B is an intermediate grade between A and C

Grade A should combine a degree of technical excellence with a developing artistic sense of purpose and control. Students should be working autonomously and using a broad range of subject matter. (The word 'artistic' is here used to denote a manipulation of technique and subject matter at a level where we are aware of the unobtrusive control, unity and cohesion of the writer's purpose.)

Reading Between The Lines

This is a 6 - 9 month course with group discussions by phone and postal tutorials from your personal tutor, to whom you send two assignments.

This course aims to expand your experience of reading and help you develop confidence in a wide range of styles and genres by a mixture of written responses and group discussions by phone. Formal assessment is not offered for this course.

By the end of the course you can be expected to have:

- reflected upon your reading style and habits
- gained confidence in and extended the range of your reading
- discussed a variety of literature including poetry, short fiction, genre fiction, autobiography and novels
- explored the reading process in a structured way and annotated texts
- discussed books with your tutor and other students, relating their value judgments to your own
- written responses to texts which articulate your ideas for others

- kept a Learning Journal which details your responses to books and tutorial discussions

Appendix 10

OCA Annual Monitoring Exercise for University of Glamorgan

Open College of the Arts
Creative Writing Course

Accredited by the University of Glamorgan

1997/8 Monitoring Exercise

To: Jan Brennan - Academic Registry

From: Graham Mort - OCA Writing Course Director

Date: 18.3.99.

Subject: 1997/8 Annual Monitoring of the OCA Creative Writing Assessment Scheme

Please find enclosed four copies of the Annual Monitoring Exercise for the OCA Creative Writing Courses, levels 1-3.

Each Pack Contains:

- Director's statement
- DFEE report on guidance - extracts
- Analysis of student enrolments
- Assessments grades awarded
- Assessment Officer's annual report
- External Examiner's annual report
- Creative Writing Prospectus & Student Handbook
- Questionnaire for 1998/9 academic year

Open College of the Arts

Academic year 1997/8

Course Director's Annual Report On Monitoring

In the academic year 1997/98 OCA enrolled 460 writing students. Of those, 18 opted for a grade assessment of their work and of that group 12 applied to the University of Glamorgan for academic credit points. A more detailed breakdown appears on the sheet 'OCA creative writing enrolment and assessment 1997/8.'

Initial information is provided to all new students via a writing prospectus and the OCA student handbook. Not all students opt for assessment - as the figures above show - and our task to assure quality of delivery across all students. All the courses are delivered through a system of coursebooks which contain detailed guidance to students in the form of information, examples of writing, analysis, exercises and assignments. These assignments form the core work sent to tutors.

These coursebooks are regularly updated and checked for accuracy. In 1996 the Starting to Write coursebook received a major re-write which strengthened the range of examples of writing and deepened some of the discussion around writing technique - particularly those sections dealing with narrative voice and the use of dialogue. Where tutor development sessions indicated that there were problems with students relating to assignments these were clarified or modified to allow more freedom of choice. The Advanced writing course carries no written material as such, but the folio of options is updated annually and more detailed guidelines about the learning journal were included in 1997/8.

The tutor training programme is coordinated by the Course Officer, Alicia Stubbersfield. An annual monitoring of tutorial reports is carried out on all tutors by the Course Officer, who reads and comments on a selection of their reports. Through this process she is able to address issues of tone, presentation and content. Tutors receive guidance about those aspects of their tuition and where necessary exemplar material is forwarded to them. In 1997/8 there was a definite commitment to moving tutors away from handwritten responses which, although they have a personal appeal, lack the clarity of word-processed responses and are more difficult to revisit. Whilst wishing to preserve the individual approach of our tutors we were at pains to establish the importance of a warm yet critical response to the work of students.

New tutors receive exemplar material and their reports are examined after they have written two reports from each of their first batch of students. Telephone contact is also available from the Course Officer to redress any problems. The tutor handbook is also an invaluable source of guidance for tutors and the system worked well in 1997/8 with a generally high standard of report writing. The main problems brought forward by

students involved the late delivery of reports. This happened on a few occasions only, but tutors were made aware that the return of work within fourteen days is an absolute bottom line in their commitment. A telephone Helpline was introduced as an experiment in 1997/8, offering guidance to students who were experiencing problems but who might not wish to contact their own tutor. Members of the Creative Writing Course Committee offered their guidance on this project but less than six calls were received in total in the course of the year.

Two tutor development training days were held in 1997/8 - in London and in Manchester and sixteen places were available for each session. The London session was fully booked but the Manchester session attracted nine tutors - a disappointing turnout which might have been avoided by a longer notice time. It was acknowledged that not paying tutors for their attendance was problematic, but current budgets simply don't allow for this. The sessions dealt with practical report writing based on actual students work. Approaches to report writing was discussed and the Manchester session offered specialist workshops in both poetry and prose using experienced tutors as workshop leaders. A general discussion was held in the form of a plenary session which gave tutors the opportunity to discuss their work with OCA. Tutors were reminded that they have a tutor representative on the Course Committee and that they will act as a conduit for their views.

The development days were illuminating in that standards of response were already high and what the sessions really allowed was the dissemination of good practise from tutor to tutor rather than from the organisation and its managers down. Future sessions will aim to draw on the tacit knowledge and experience held by our tutors in order to develop course content and tutorial practise.

For students opting for assessment, guidelines exist which are designed to take them clearly through all stages of the process. In 1997/8 an assessment officer was appointed to coordinate assessment and to assure that the Course Director's involvement in assessment could not obscure any need for reform or revision of the process through a conflict of interest. Upon registering for assessment[209] the student receives detailed assessment criteria for their course and is given two possible dates for returning their folio to the college, so that they have at least three months after completing the course to revise and re-draft their work in the light of all they have learned. This, effectively, ensures that assessment is a formative process and not merely a terminal one.

As well as submitting a folio of creative work students submit a reflective account of the course drawn form their learning journal. This is not marked but helps to show their intention in the creative work and creates a context for marking it. Students responded very positively to this new aspect of assessment and the assessors were impressed by the range and sophistication of the student responses to the course. In some cases

[209] See Appendix 9 , p195 for Assessment Guidelines from OCA Student Handbook 1989

the reflective account offered a depth of understanding not easily perceived in the creative work itself, indicating that critical skills were more developed than creative ones.

Co-ordinated by John Cassidy, the assessment officer, assessment is carried out through a triangulated system. The assessors are Graham Mort, John Cassidy and Ailsa Cox. The external examiner, Dr. Linden Peach looked at a 100% sample of the 1997/8 assessments and wrote an interim report on each round of assessment. He provided an annual report at the end of the process and the OCA assessment officer also produced an internal examiner's report which is now distributed to students opting for assessment in 1998/9.

The grades are ratified by OCA's academic committee before being passed back to the students. The writing courses are monitored by the Course Committee which oversees course developments and discusses issues brought forward by tutors as well as more general issues. Minutes from that committee are circulated to all tutors with a newsletter from the course Director and they are also sent to the academic committee for information.

Tutors are made aware of the standards of assessment by receiving the grades of their own students and through receiving the internal examiner's report. and the report of the external examiner. The external examiner's report is discussed at a creative writing Course Committee meeting and amongst the examiner's themselves. As a result of the 1997/8 report the examiner's are now reviewing the use of + - marks in the final grade bands. The broader issues in his report will be noted by individual tutors and by the tutor development officer. It was also acknowledged at the assessment meeting that the slowness of the assessment process can be a problem for some students.

In 1997/8 students were able to opt for assessment at three points in the year and had at least three months to submit their portfolio. The problems of ratifying and then returning the grades quickly are not easy to solve for a college with all-year round enrolment. It was acknowledged that though the system had problems, those problems could not be addressed within the present enrolment system. It was felt that the fullest possible information going out to students would at least inform them of the actual time-scale.

In 1998 a DFEE questionnaire was sent to all students and edited extracts from that exercise are enclosed here. For the 1998/9 academic year, all students opting for assessment will be provided with a questionnaire in order to facilitate closer monitoring of the process. A copy if the new questionnaire is included in this pack of materials for information.

Graham Mort
Course Director, 16.3.99.

Open College of the Arts

Writing assessment questionnaire.

As part of our annual monitoring exercise in partnership with the University of Glamorgan we are required to seek student feedback on the assessment process. We'd be grateful if you could fill in this questionnaire and return it to us in the envelope provided. Your views will be valuable in shaping and developing our assessment programme in the future.

Name:.....Course : .....Student No:.....

At what point in the course did you opt for assessment?

Upon enrolment
Part way through
At the end

Why did you decide to have your work assessed?

Curiosity
Credit Points
Other

How helpful did you find the assessment criteria and advice?

Unhelpful
Helpful
Very helpful

Did you consult your tutor about any aspect of assessment?

Yes
No

If so, how helpful did you find your tutor's advice?

Unhelpful
Helpful
Very helpful

Signed:.....Date:.....

Please use the reverse of this sheet to offer any other information or to expand on your answers here.

Appendix 11

OCA Reflective Account Assessment Guidelines

The Reflective Account

Assessment Procedure for Creative Writing

As well as being asked to submit units of creative work to the assessment panel, candidates are asked to submit a fifth piece in the form of a 'reflective account'. This account could be in the form of an essay, but this does not mean that it has to take a very formal or impersonal tone. The account should be based on the contents of your teaming journal and is intended essentially as a *personal response* to the course. It will help to create a context for the presentation of your creative work and will involve you in bringing together your thinking about the creative process.

Before attempting to write your reflective account you should first review the contents of your Learning Journal - especially your own Assignment Commentaries and the Tutorial Reports. The reflective account should be a piece of between 1,000 and 1,500 words. It should attempt to give the assessors an overview of your experience of the course: how your ideas about writing have changed and developed as the course progressed and how you think the writing itself has developed.

In order to achieve an overview of your experience of the course, you might also make specific reference to the pieces which you have submitted for assessment. This could involve discussing what each unit of writing was trying to achieve and to what extent you feel that you have been successful.

Other aspects of the reflective account might be to relate literature which you have read or experienced in performance to the development of your own work. Again, the emphasis should be placed upon how this may have influenced or informed *your own writing* rather than on a critique of other literature.

The reflective account will not actually be graded as part of the your assessment for academic credit but it will be read carefully by the assessors, Candidates should therefore regard it as an essential component of the Assessment Folio. **Without it the assessment panel will not consider your Folio to be complete.**

If you are a borderline candidate who falls between grades, then the reflective essay will be used as a reference point in the final decision. **In short, a good reflective essay could significantly enhance your final grade**

Appendix 12

Poem written by schoolchildren from Yarlside School, Barrow in Furness, with Graham Mort, May 2000

A Boulder, Dreaming.

The first sheepfold dead ahead;
blossom fills it like a pond.

Bluebells drift in wind, blossom
lies on the ground like lily-pads.

The boulder dreams it is alive and will see
more than its stone prison .

I close my eyes.

The wall flows down the hill, under
a sycamore's rustling arms.

Crows squawk in the field,
sun shines into my face.

Light competes with wind,
then slowly fades.

Nature living and dying.

Stone-bugs crawl from solid rock,
Foxgloves shiver, sharing my tears.

The biggest beetle ever crawls
into the sun; stones glimmer.

A bull stares at me, fearlessly,
a cabbage butterfly flaps past,

I close my eyes.

Stone is faced like an alien,
holly pricks my legs.

In comes the wind, blowing
leaves into the clouds.

A wall seems to climb a hill
or fall down as a waterfall.

Nature living and dying.

Nettles surround the stone,
Clouds of mud boil in puddles.

What does rock feel like,
trapped inside a wall?

Does stone dream of freedom?
To see the world and all its seas?

I close my eyes.

May blossom gushes white foam,
Walls swim away like fish.

Polished stones glimmer,
Sky reels into dizzy clouds.

Two tiny lambs bathe in sun,
a blue and purple beetle crawls away.

Nature living and dying.

The stone is trapped:
It can't get out.

I close my eyes,
and a bright light shines inside.